UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

The Pedagogy of Epistolarity:
Writing to Read—Reading to Write

by

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ABSTRACT

The present research explores how adolescents develop and redefine their identities through writing about their literary experiences with novels in a reader response program called Reading Room. The empirical data of this study consist of selections from 12 years of penbook letters (nearly one thousand penbooks) written by grade 8 and 9 junior high school students since 1990. Students wrote multiple entries about each of the books they read. Student reflections on their literary experiences took the epistolary form (letters)—most addressed to the teacher. The teacher not only read the penbook letters but also responded to each in writing. Thus, the main pedagogical challenge for the teacher was, first, how to interpret the student writings in terms of their linguistic, developmental, and personalistic features, and second, how to respond to these writings.

The study starts by exploring the different senses of place that the students experience in the Reading Room, as well as a curricular overview of the Reading Room program and the various dimensions of the epistolarity of writing about reading. Literary theory defines the scholarly domain that orients to the interpretation of literary sources. It has become an umbrella term for the approaches and philosophies of reading texts. So, in order to gain a measure of the relation between a literary theory of reading and the experience of writing, the works of Peter J. Rabinowitz, Joseph A. Appleyard, and Martha

Nussbaum are examined with the objective to draw out the connections to writing, meaning and identity. Next, four interpretive perspectives are presented and applied to selected student penbook letters: discourse analysis, (auto)biography and narrativity, hermeneutics, and critical theory. These interpretive perspectives are tested with the purpose of providing teachers with understandings that could be translated into thoughtful responses to the students' penbook letters.

Finally these insights are brought to bear on the pedagogy of epistolatory writing about reading. It is shown how such pedagogical understanding of the students' learning and personal growth enables the teacher to tactfully encourage and offer support when and where needed.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Personal Background

Being read to

For as long as I can remember, stories have been an important part of my life. My earliest memories are of bedtime stories that were both read and told by my mother. The classic tale of Frances Hodgson Burnett *The Secret Garden* still remains a favorite.

I remember a small upstairs room in an old wartime semi-bungalow. The bedroom walls were slanted and one had to be careful getting out of bed to avoid a resounding bump on the head. Leading us into the dream world of sleep, my mother read a chapter of *The Secret Garden* every night to my two brothers and me. For her, reading at bedtime was a time of sharing and a calming transition from the day's adventures in the neighborhood. But for me the story transported me into the world of Mary Lennox at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire and to the neglected walled-in garden which she gradually returned to life with the help of the Cockney gardener, Ben Weatherstaff. I became attached to Dickon, the strange moor boy who could charm the foxes and even Colin, Mary's sickly and spoiled cousin. The world of these characters often appeared in subsequent dreams. I realized very early that I could enter and construct magical and remarkable places through listening to stories. At that age I doubt that children know the difference between a real experience and a literary one. I was the kind of child who transformed the back alley the next day into my own secret garden complete with grasshoppers and rhubarb patches.

My mother was a talented storyteller. She read stories as though she were telling them. Years later, reading books in story corner myself to kindergarten and grade one students, I came to realize just how much she must have omitted, and how she likely substituted words and ideas to make the story comprehensible to her three small children. My brothers and I were captivated by the stories. We never wanted the light to go out or the story to end.

Books

"Where's God?" I asked my mother. I vaguely recall that we were standing in the kitchen of my grandmother's house and I was holding the *Bible* that my mother had asked me to fetch. I must have been about six years old and I had to learn the Lord's Prayer for Sunday school.

"Oh, He is very near because I talk to him every day," she answered.

"Every day?" I burst out. I remember how it seemed so strange to me, because I had been in the house all morning and I had not heard my mother talk to anyone.

"Oh yes, I feel very close to God," she continued, "closer than to anyone else, and you, too, can feel close to Him ... if you want," she added. And then she looked at me as if she expected an answer.

But the way she expressed her loyalties and her intimacy disturbed me.

"Do you feel closer to God than to dad?" I queried. I really had wanted to ask her whether she felt closer to God than to me.

"Well," your dad is only your father on earth, but God is the eternal Father. He will always be with me." As she looked at me, it seemed as if a great gulf had been drawn between us. Then she glanced at the *Bible* and said, "It is all written in the New Testament, you know. When I read some of these *Bible* stories about Jesus and his disciples, I am really talking to God. Would you like to read the one about the Good Samaritan?"

I remember handing my mother the *Bible* as if it suddenly had become unbearably heavy. Normally I loved my mom reading stories to me. But instead of waiting for my mother to read from the *Bible*, I rushed to the old study upstairs that doubled as guest bedroom and I closed the door. I felt sorry for dad–and especially for myself. How could a book cause such a lapse in loyalty on the part of my mom? From that time on this big black book became an object of ambivalence. But also of awe. I had learned that reading could profoundly impact my life as a child and that reading expands awareness, creates opportunities for profound insight.

Families of books

In the study I took refuge in the books piled high in long oak shelves that covered the walls. I opened the glass doors and inhaled the musty smell of old books. Many of the covers were faded and bound in soft leather with gold edges and sometimes the spines barely held the yellowing pages together. These books of the past certainly did not look like the ones that I borrowed from the library. Often the books had inscriptions in the front covers and I had spent many hours pondering who these people were and how they were related to me.

Did Marie Krauss read *Fanchon the Cricket* and really like it? I later realized that Marie Krauss was my old maiden aunt, Auntie Mamie, who often peered into my face and queried at Sunday dinner, " Judy, penny for your thoughts." She died before I turned sixteen. Who was "dear little Rosebud" or Bertie and Pricilla who sent all their love at Christmas? Why would Norman receive a book "from Hazel with a headache"? I recognized my father's name and his sister Joan on some of the books, but many of the other names remain a mystery even today.

Now these books are in my own bookcase, the family library in my own home. They connect me to generations of family before my family with my own husband and children, and to family before my family with my parents. Recently, I asked my mother about the identities and meanings of the inscriptions in some of these old books. But she too is puzzled. The books came down through my father's family. But my father is now suffering from old age dementia and looks just as puzzled at the books as my mother.

Through my mother's family I also have vivid experiences of the power of reading and books, especially the *Bible*. There was a time when we would regularly drive from Medicine Hat north to visit my maternal grandmother in her small house in Calgary. She was a severe woman, who was married to grandfather, a tailor by profession and fundamentalist minister by vocation. My grandmother never read to me but she would lock herself in the bathroom with the *Bible* for hours.

Once, I had to go to the bathroom so badly that I could no longer hold it. Knocking on the door produced no result and I began to doubt that anyone was in the small bathroom. As I pulled the door I immediately discovered my mistake. My grandmother was kneeling in front of the toilet with her hands on the seat in a praying posture. But then she turned sharply to look who had intruded into her alcove. I quickly pushed the door shut. That was the day I wet my pants.

The library

My mother believed in using the public library. Every Saturday morning she would bundle her children off to the Medicine Hat Library. We always listened to a story read by Mrs. Scanalin, the white-haired librarian, and then we would load up with books. I remember Mrs. Scanalin's infectious laugh, her crackly voice, and the warmth that radiated from her face as she became at one with the story. As soon as I learned to read, I walked to the library myself and continued the habit of signing out as many books as I could read in a week. It wasn't long before I was browsing the sections of adult fiction. I spent hours roaming through the shelves, sitting down on the floor, reading book jackets, and first chapters.

When I was eleven or twelve I became immersed in historical fiction. I must have read every book I could that featured strong female protagonists in difficult war and other hardship situations. It was then that I began to read many of the classics from the dark oaken bookshelves of my grandmother's library. I was especially attracted to the worlds that Charles Dickens created in books like *David Copperfield* and *Tale of Two Cities.*

I owned very few books. Perhaps it was the Depression mentality of the times. Why would one buy a book for a child if it could be borrowed from the library for free? My father's sister, Auntie Joan in Toronto, would send books and socks for Christmas. So, I do remember a few books that I personally owned, prized and reread—one had beautiful child ballet dancers in tutus, one was *Anne of Green Gables,* and another was a well-worn copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's poetry anthology for children. Many years later, I would read aloud many of Stevenson's poems to my own students in hopes of fostering an appreciation for poetry.

Teaching

I can honestly say that I love teaching. Mostly I enjoy the relationships: discovering what excites each student, and trying to construct lessons and create experiences that are meaningful for the children in my care. The role of teacher is as much a part of me as mother, wife, daughter, and sister.

I have been teaching for over 25 years plus a few breaks here and there when I became a mother to two sons, Mark and Michael, and when I had a sabbatical year to complete a Master's Degree in Education. What drove me to consider graduate work then was my connection with stories and the experiences that they evoke in children. In my thesis I explored the opportunities for moral growth in children through children's literature. This topic arose specifically out of the experiences of reading the story of Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* with my students. I will never forget the tears in my students' eyes and the faltering of my own voice as I struggled to read the passage where the sparrow kisses the prince a final goodbye on the lips and falls dead to the ground. This reading experience had a profound, almost transformative effect on the class. As a mother, I was also witness to the effects of different kinds of stories on Mark and Michael.

Over the years I have taught children from kindergarten to grade nine, in small and large schools, in closed and open area structures, in split grades, and as a generalist and a language arts specialist in both cities of Toronto and Edmonton. My most recent assignment over the last dozen or more years has been as a teacher of language arts to grades eight and nine students and a teacher librarian in kindergarten through grade nine. Becoming a part time librarian was a great opportunity for reading and introducing new adolescent fiction and picture books to students and feeding my own appetite for poignant stories.

Background to the Study

This study aims to explore how adolescents develop and redefine their identities through writing about their literary experiences with novels and stories in a reader response program. In particular, I ask the question how is the epistolatory writing about reading a pedagogical concern for the teacher. My specific interest is to examine the relation between student written discourse of a fictional text and the students' real lives.

Around 1990, as part of my junior high language arts program, I developed a reading response journal component (that I called Reading Room) based on the research of Nancie Atwell (1987) and others. Over a period of more than ten years, I have collected over 500 penbooks (journals/scribblers) containing a variety of student writings (used as data in this study). The penbooks contain letters expressing students' reflections on their reading of contemporary and classic novels, short stories, and poetry. Each penbook letter is always addressed to the teacher (me), to a fellow student, to a parent, or to another teacher in the school. Each letter, therefore, contains a "response" from any one of these addressees. However, the large majority of the letters are addressed to the teacher and responded to by the teacher. In this dissertation the teacher is also the researcher of the study. However, in writing the dissertation I distance myself by adopting the position of any teacher who would be challenged to "read" and interpret the letters and provide a pedagogically appropriate response to the student. So a main focus of this study is to examine different ways of looking at these letters. By showing how the letters may be interpreted, I aim to make available to any teacher who would adopt the Reading Room approach an appropriate way of understanding these letters and their authors. By examining selected literary perspectives and by employing interpretive models, this dissertation research aims to build a knowledge base, that functions as a resource by means of which teachers could respond to such letters and by means of which they could orient to the individual students in their classes.

In general, these letters also show systematic evidence of student achievement in terms of reading and writing skills, literary sources, and social and emotional growth. They also portray the ways that the needs of an academically diverse and socially differentiated student population are met. As well, I found that the penbook letters provided me, as a teacher, with rich insights into the personal lives and subjective understandings of my students.

However, at a more analytic, pedagogical level these students' writings contain many more riches than can be mined by a teacher who is primarily preoccupied with the daily practicalities of teaching the language arts program to grade eight and nine students. Seen as a body of research data, the material offers an archival site to examine the relationship between reading and writing, the nature of writing as a process for students to come to certain understandings, and the epistolary significance of letters (between students and teacher) as a dynamic and open pedagogical space. The penbook letters also raise questions of how literary and interpretive theory may provide guiding perspectives for making sense of the student writing.

When students reflect in writing on the book or story they are reading, their responses tend to be directly shaped by the reading experience itself. When they have just started a new book, they often write a letter that takes the form of a plot summary. This may involve discussing any of the elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement, and resolution. Other writing approaches that students take in their penbook letters may spontaneously engage a variety of genres: personal reflection, biographic interpretation, critical appraisal, essay, and so forth.

For example, in writing in an expository essay format a student may have developed a view of the story or some aspect of the story and thus the student is testing his or her opinion about some theme, issue, or literary experience. In this letter a grade nine student, David, selects a quotation from Philip Pullman's *The Amber Spyglass* and examines the meaning it embraces for him.

The Amber Spyglass, the third of a very intense and complicated trilogy of books, is also in my opinion, the most exciting and explanatory of the three. At the point in the book where this quote is taken, Lyra and Will, the protagonists, are just leaving the world of the dead. They have been there for a very long time, and it is a world without color, life, or happiness, where everything is dark, evil, and gloomy, Will has the power to cut through to different worlds with the use of his one-of-a-kind knife, and that is how they escape from the world of the dead. Tired, hungry and miserable, this scene refreshes Lyra and Will with a beautiful world full of color and happiness.

"Will and Lyra exchanged a look. Then he cut a window, and it was the sweetest thing they had ever seen.

The night air filled their lungs, fresh and clean and cool; their eyes took in a canopy of dazzling stars, and the shine of water somewhere below, and here and there groves of great trees, as high as castles, dotting the wide savanna. Will and Lyra fell exhausted in the dew-laden grass, every nerve in their bodies blessing the sweetness of the good soil, the night air, the stars."

Now, why, in a 518 page book, did I choose that quote above all others? I found this section of the book brought alive the world that Lyra and Will were entering, and I believe it did an excellent job of showing the relief and satisfaction the children felt as they left the dark underground world of the dead.

In addition, the imagery portrayed in this excerpt is spectacular. As I read through this part, my mind was in a dull state as it took in what the world of the dead must have looked like: black and white, gloomy, and not a place I would like to be. But as I read through those words, my mind filled with pictures of how that new, beautiful world looked like: trees as tall as skyscrapers, a night full of stars, and two children lying down on the grass together. I could even feel the relief that went through every nerve in their bodies, as it happened.

> *Reading that last sentence, I clearly recalled my experience at a summer camp I go to every year. Late at night, lying down beneath the stars, with the dew on the grass, the experience came back to me so vividly it was almost tangible.*

Other times the student's focus is not so much on the experience of reading but rather on the experience of writing. The reading is just a pretext for exploring personal connections with the personal life of the student. For example...

> *I have but recently started The Picture of Dorian Gray. So far it is interesting. There is one quote in particular that I want to share.*
> *"When I like people immensely I never tell their names to anyone. It is like surrendering a part of them. I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious or marvelous to us. The commonest thing is delightful if one only hides it. (p. 7)"*
> *I think this is an interesting way to look at things and I think that it is curious I haven't come across it before. Now that I think about it though, it seems to be true. If everyone knew everything about everything and everyone else, life would be boring. There would never be anything new or exciting to discover or learn. There wouldn't be the challenge of trying to figure people out. Also, the part about common things being delightful when they are secrets hasn't proved false either. I can even remember a time when I was talking to a friend and I kept something unimportant from her, and she went nuts trying to figure it out. Even as I am writing this, I can remember more and more examples of these situations.*
> *In this book, I have only gotten up to the thirteenth page and already there is so much to think about. I think that this book is very well written considering that it has me writing so much about a single half-paragraph. I look forward to reading the rest of this book.*

Because of the frequent writing contact between teacher and students through mutual penbook reflections, the Reading Room program tends to contribute strongly towards the teacher's sensitive understanding of personal and subjective dimensions of individual students' lives and learning. This too, is systematically studied through the data collected. I reflect on student writings to discover various interpretive perspectives that help me in my research to make sense of the pedagogical dimensions, contributions, promises, and implications of a program whereby students are making sense of literary texts (novels, poems, stories, etc.) through their own writing and communicating this writing to their teacher (myself) as well as to other students and their parents. In addition, I use interpretive inquiry to acquire an understanding of the lived dimension of the quality of the adolescents' reading experiences by attending to the clues contained in the language by way of written reflections.

In the beginning when colleagues hear about my Reading Room program, some seem somewhat skeptical. But they quickly become intrigued when I show how this program allows me to teach in an engaged manner a rich variety of language arts skills and literary knowledge. The most crucial outcome is probably that Reading Room converts many nonreaders, reluctant or occasional readers to enthusiastic and avid readers. When a student begins to enjoy reading, it is always a major breakthrough in a literature class. While I feel regularly forced to test my students on their achievements in English literature and language arts, I am convinced that a good teacher does not need to frequently test his or her students. A good teacher knows his or her students. And as the year progresses my Reading Room program lets me get to know my students very intimately—their inclinations, strengths, and weaknesses. Through their penbook letters I gain a sense of their characters and personalities. So I know that Ben has moved from being a non-reader to a student who now appreciates books. Nevertheless, it is surprising sometimes to see how a student like Ben suddenly gives an unsollicited testimony of the change he went through from reluctant or non-reader to regular or avid reader. Ben is a bright student and he has done his best to rebel against the value of the Reading Room program. Thus, I was especially amused with Ben's use of the word "transformation."

Of all the books I have read this term, no doubt Eldest (and its prequel Eragon) is my favorite. I actually turned off the TV to read it! Let me tell you that was a first! Eldest has changed my view of books in general. They are no longer just "more homework," and they have suddenly become as interesting as any good TV show or video game. I selected the following quote from Eldest because in a way it tells about a similar transformation I went through in reading this book.

… more evidence of how his bond with Saphira had changed him. He touched one ear, letting his fingers wander over the unfamiliar shape. It was difficult for him to accept this transformation… even though he had known it would occur--and occasionally welcomed it for last confirmation, but in reality it filled him with confusion. He resented the fact that he had no say in the changes, but at the same time curious where they would lead him… When will I finally find out who and what I am?

I feel this is exactly what happened to me while reading this book. Now I actually like books. In the past I would have considered it extremely nerdy for someone to like books. Alas, I am now curious where these transformations will lead me in life. I hope that you can understand how difficult it is for me to accept my new found hobby since it goes against a view that I have kept for years: that reading is boring. Yet, reading isn't boring to me any longer so why do I have a hard time accepting the change I am going through? The only answer to this is "habit," a bad habit, mind you, which I will try with all my strength to break. Meanwhile I have to admit: reading is not ALWAYS boring.

The Dissertation Research Question

My dissertation research question is formulated as follows: "How can interpretive perspectives applied to student epistolary writing about their experiences of literary engagement produce insights that may inform pedagogical understandings and practice for teachers of literature?" In order to pursue this research question I address the following thematized questions:

(1) What is the epistolatory significance of penbook letter writing?

(2) What can be learned about the experience of writing from literary theory?

(3) What interpretive perspectives can be used as guides for interpreting student letters?

(4) How can a pedagogical understanding of these interpretive perspectives inform pedagogical understanding and the ability to practically respond and act for teachers of literature?

The research question has important implications for student growth in reading and sense of self and identity. The research may provide teachers with insights into how students interpret literary texts and how they may respond to their students' interpretations. This process could also stand as a model for English language arts teacher education, as a way for teacher-education students, new, and experienced teachers to develop understandings that are rooted in theory relevant to their classroom practice.

Research Methodology

I approach the student writings with the perspectival guide of multiple methods associated with literary and interpretive theories. I examine the theoretical and practical context of reading and writing. And I use pedagogical methods to address the relevance of interpretive theories as possible approaches in the interpretation of student writing about reading. Thus, this study does not aim for empirical generalization, but rather it offers an investigative exploration into the meaning dimensions of writing about reading as a pedagogical practice.

The student experiences of reading and writing are described in terms of Reading Room, a program of teaching language arts that I have developed on the basis of initial work done by Nancie Atwell. The assumption of the study is that every literary theory contains an implicit or explicit understanding of the nature or process of reading. And each understanding implies a certain kind of cognitive, emotive, or moral growth.

Students and their parents/caregivers who have consented to contribute their writing to this research have provided me with their penbooks upon completion of their grade nine schooling. These penbooks have been collected over a period of about ten years. They comprise the data from which the research will draw.

I use the contextual perspectives of space and curriculum for elaborating a concrete and practical understanding of the geography and programmatic aspects of Reading Room. In Chapter 2, Spaces in the Place of Reading Room, I explore the Reading Room as a place and space for reading. Through interpreting student writing about the experience of reading and writing, I look at what makes Reading Room a special place conducive to personal and academic student growth. I investigate ideas such as the space of meaning, place ballet, atmosphere, place of the teacher, space of the text, and characteristics of private reading. This chapter also contains practical information about the Reading Room program. I discuss such topics as how to get started, setting up the classroom and response journal, organization details, student expectations, and the role of the teacher. In the next section of my dissertation I apply a number of interpretive perspectives in reading and responding to student penbook letters. Chapter 3, The Epistolatory Writing About Reading, comprises the interpretive guides of the study in which I examine the idea of letter (penbook) writing and selected aspects of epistolarity: the exchange, mediatory, and time dimensions of student penbook letters. In Chapter 4, Literary Theory: Reading and Writing, I investigate how selected theories of reading have implications for understanding the experience of writing. I explore conceptions of reading, writing, meaning, and identity by focusing on (1) Rabinowitz's Before Reading; (2) Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader*; (3) Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*. I relate issues arising from these explorations to Sumara's *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight*. In Chapter 5, Interpretive Perspectives, interpretive practices derived from discourse analysis, (auto)biography, hermeneutics, and critical theory are used to interpret writings and writing fragments. Since most of the penbooks letters are, in fact, exchanges between these students and me, the writings are examined for the manner in which pedagogical aspects of teaching play a positive or negative role in learning, student growth and the development of personal identity.

Finally, the ultimate aim of this kind of work is to sponsor through this kind of writing a pedagogical sensibility in the reader—colleagues and other educators. In Chapter 6, The Pedagogy of Epistolatory Writing About Reading, I investigate the pedagogical aspects of the penbook letters: the personal, relational, interpretive, and ethical dimensions. To sum up the dissertation, I include Chapter 7, Conclusion and Implications.

CHAPTER TWO

SPACES IN THE PLACE OF READING ROOM

As a teacher, I have often said to the parents of my students, "Reading occupies a large space in the program of language arts in junior high." When I made this statement, I took for granted that parents would understand what I meant by "a large space." But if they would have asked, "what do you mean?" I would have clarified that reading takes up a considerable "space of time." And I would explain why it is that reading takes such pedagogical priority in the timetable of the school.

It is not accidental that the notions of space and time so easily seem to flow into each other--"space" also means "time." Spatial and temporal terms easily mix as in "a stretch of time." Etymologically, *espace* can be traced back through a variety of derivatives to "spoed" or "speed" and also to "success" and "quickness" (see Klein, 1979). And yet, the notion of space, just like the concept of time, becomes strangely puzzling once we are asked what it really means. The question of what constitutes the space of reading--not just in the language arts program but in the entire "realm" of teaching and learning--becomes pedagogically challenging.

How can we understand the space of reading in the language arts classroom? How is this space made up of other spaces and places? What are these places and spaces like within the act of reading? The actions of picking up a book, opening it, and sitting down to read it involve the body orienting itself in physical space, but the space includes more than bodily movements. The sense of space constantly seems to shift in the transitions of picking up a book to read. The author of fiction Italo Calvino playfully draws his reader into the space of his novel when he opens the book by directly addressing the reader:

> You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler.* Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other

> thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" Maybe they haven't heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell, "I'm beginning to read Italo Calvino's new novel!" or if you prefer, don't say anything; just hope they'll leave you alone. (Calvino, 1981, p. 3)

If the reader is not alone, the space becomes a social one that necessitates the blocking out of the presence of others. Entering the space of a story is a solitary experience. Calvino continues his directions by making his reader aware of the fact that not every space is best for reading. We have to be able to be comfortable, and yet not too comfortable so we would fall asleep. A good reading space requires that we can position our body such that we can forget about it. The possibilities are many:

> Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upsidedown, naturally. (Calvino, 1981, p. 3)

This provocative description from the opening pages of Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* already contains problems for a language teacher whose students are expected to immerse themselves in novels and other stories and even write about their reading experiences, all within the confines of the physical space of a traditional classroom. I will describe my own classroom from recent years, but this room can be taken as a generic example of many ordinary classrooms.

The Physical Space of Reading Room

The language arts place is a classroom in a junior high school. The Reading Room space on the timetable is comprised of two periods of fifty-two minutes a week. During these periods, the classroom is transformed into a reading space with its own distinctive mood. It contrasts with other places such as the hallway, the office, the art room, the gym—in fact the entire school. It even contrasts with the normal ebb and flow of the regular language arts classes when the classroom is a collective space of speaking, listening, sharing and interacting. During the period of Reading Room the space has a unique atmosphere—perhaps more reminiscent of a library where one whispers so as not to disturb the others who are lost in their books or their thoughts. Even the students who momentarily look up from writing some thoughts about their reading are not really "there" in that classroom place. I can see it in their vacant eyes. The bodies of the students are draped in relaxed postures across the classroom furniture. The classroom looks like a stage of dancers who have taken frozen position over the props of the chairs and tables. The furniture looks plain and uncomfortable but the dancers have assumed reading positions. David Seamon speaks of such setting as a place ballet: "a foundation of at-homeness and dwelling ... the coming together of people's time-space routines and body ballets in terms of space" (1979, p. 143).

The activities that go on in this class are tied directly or indirectly to reading, writing, and books. Susan writes to a student from another class about how the exchange of penbooks operates.

> *I've never written to you in my penbook so let me explain to you how this works. In my Reading Room class, I write a letter to someone about the book I'm reading every week. Then that person, who is you, reads the letter, and then writes a sort of response back to me. Okay, I hope you understand; if not, you can look at some of the other letters in my penbook.*

Of course the Reading Room is much more than Susan's quick operational description. The room has to accommodate enough desks for everyone to create and occupy a place that is personal and comfortable. Unlike Calvino's reader, these students only have limited space to create their own reading place. In the past I have experimented with letting the students make their personal places anywhere they please: on the floor, on the desks, under the desk, in a corner. However, this freedom does not necessarily translate into undisturbed reading. So now I have made a pedagogical decision to have my students sit in their desks when they read. Even in their own desks students find their own reading and writing positions.

I also find my own reading and writing places at my teacher's desk or in an empty student desk, at a table, or in front of a computer. Once students learn how Reading Room works, they move easily and freely in the classroom. They are insiders. A student quietly slips out of the room to the washroom, delivers his or her penbook to the teacher's mailbox, or laughs out loud at an amusing passage in a book. These scenarios are examples of a kind of "bodily and psychological comfort" (Atwood, 1979, p. 147) that characterizes Reading Room. The comfort of the room is enhanced by routines. "Most of us identify with a place because we use it, and get to know it reasonably intimately. We take our two feet and move around in it and come to count on it" (Jacobs, 1961, p. 129). The routines of Reading Room organize inner and outer space in such a way that students know where and when to place their penbooks in class storage boxes, the teacher mailbox, or on another student's desk. Students understand how aspects of the program operate such as the book nook, cycles of letter writing, use of computers and the library, washroom privileges, and the sign out book. They expect two Reading Room classes every week and become dismayed if other classes or events are substituted.

The Inner Space of Reading Room

As the time of Reading Room becomes a pedagogical space for students, it creates the condition for the opening of another kind of space of innerness or insideness. It becomes a space where ideas can be explored. Edward Relph refers to this space modality as existential insideness "whereby a place extends at-homeness and allows its participants to feel profoundly inside" (1976b, p. 55). Just as one's home is a place to find time for quiet reflection, so the Reading Room may become a refuge from the stresses of listening to teachers, studying new material, writing exams, or giving formal presentations. Stephen describes the quality of this special space experience as follows:

> *As the year closes down and summer opens up, I look back wondering what school would have been like without Reading Room. No good entertaining literature, no novels to calm me down, no quiet thoughtful place. I look around the room as I write this letter, and see the many students relaxed and at ease. They are not bored like in a regular class, but their minds are at rest and no one is there to bother them or interrupt their train of thought. I now realize that school is not just learning but rest as well.*

Stephen makes references to relaxation and rest that can easily be misunderstood. They mean much more than just sitting back and doing nothing. Rather these words refer to the mood of reading, to reading as an experiential atmosphere that is both passive and active. The reader is open and therefore passive vis-à-vis the text but then the reality of the text takes a hold on the reader. Thus the novel as story is passive and aggressive. The reader is relaxed and involved, and so "not bored." As a teacher who hopes to induce a deep appreciation for reading in her students, it is gratifying when a student reflects on what school would be like without this narrative meaningfulness of Reading Room in the school day. Another student, Karen, is worried about high school. She is saddened that the kind of reading that she has experienced in grade nine will be lost when she leaves.

> *I have been thinking and for the first time it's hit me. This is the last year that I will have the chance to do something so precious to me--read. Next year I won't have time to read for relaxation, only to analyze a book for an assignment. There are so many worlds waiting for me to discover and I*

> *won't be able to. This really scares me. I find that reading is a time I can relax and that will be gone soon. It's just unbelievable, sort of like a part of me will be left behind. One year is such a short period of time considering how long our existence is. I have about 50 books sitting in my room that I want to read. I think that reading is something I will really miss because I'm a reader. I always have been and I always will be. I guess I'll just have to put it aside for a while, sort of like an idea you stow away till later. It will always be there when you need it. You can never really lose it. I wish people really appreciated how lucky they are to be able to read just for fun, to relax. I think no matter what I couldn't give up reading.*

The Reading Room is a temporal-corporeal place that invites students like Stephen and Karen to enter other worlds where the usual demands of school lessons and classroom life are "suspended in space." O.F. Bollnow's description of a dwelling space captures this attractiveness of space experience in which one can truly dwell: "an area in which he (the person) can be relieved of continual anxious alertness, into which he can withdraw in order to return to himself" (1961, p. 33). This kind of reading without being censored is also characteristic of the kind of reading we can do in our own homes. A reader response program such as Reading Room is most successful when it tries to encompass what the reader experiences in reading privately.

Private reading creates its own private (virtual) space that features a suspension of time or feeling of indulgence. This special sense of temporality and spatiality seems to be an important dimension of reading that is addicting and that enhances a love of reading. As students experience what it is like to dwell in the space of a story, chances are that they will want to enter more such spaces and so reach for books that satiate their appetite for meaningfulness.

The Social Space of Reading Room

Reading Room, as a pedagogical practice, is an example of the creation of a teaching-learning space where the activities are not only personal but also social in nature. The class often begins with a short lesson that involves all of the students in the class. Talks about books and authors, old and new, are a favorite way to set the mood for the class. I take a book from my chalkboard ledge--there are always new books on display here--and hold it up prominently in front of my students. This Governor General Award winning novel by Martha Brooks (2002) is called *True Confessions of a Heartless Girl*.

"Isn't this a great book-cover! What do you think it evokes?" I hear a few responses, some positive some negative. We laugh. I continue, "Do you know that Martha Brooks has quite a social conscience? She actually says that she takes readers into her books to unmask and show the inner realities of her characters. This book then, is all about how life throws us curves, things we don't expect or deserve."

A student jokes aloud, "Right, like my last mark in math." Before my talk is over, there is discussion about who gets to sign out the book and read it first. Other opening class activities might include an extemporaneous talk by a student about the book she is reading, suggestions on how to choose a good book, or I may share a particularly reflective student letter to which I responded in the last Reading Room.

It is important to realize that in the temporal space of a language arts period one does not just walk into a special atmosphere that conditions and sustains a desire to read a novel. Such atmosphere has to be created and that is a pedagogical task of the teacher. The teacher tries to set a tone appropriate for a reading experience.

There are common experiences that we all encounter when we read memorable stories. In the classroom community the reading tone of the class is enhanced when students share their experiences of wanting a story to last, of the anticipation of reading the next book in the sequel, and of seeing the movie adaptation of the novel. For example, in reading Chaim Potok's novel, *I Am the Clay* (1994), Jane writes about the intensity of literature to engage and transform her. She wants to savor the book, to prolong the ending. Reflecting on such experiences of reading creates a mood for reading.

Sometimes sharing a student letter sets the right tone for creating a reading space. Jane tells us how she wants to share her appreciation of the narrative not only by writing to the teacher but also by actually writing a letter to the author.

> *Each page I read, my respect for Chaim Potok grows. I Am the Clay is powerful. Each page tells of the old man, the old woman, and the boy on their journey to leave war and stay alive. I think it is so much more powerful that Mr. Potok has not given his characters real names or really described them in detail. Each person is like the struggle of many people. I hardly know anything about the Korean War and I am learning a lot.*
>
> *I know if I wanted to, I could sit down and read this book in a few hours, but I want to save it. To never let this experience end. Have you ever had that feeling about a novel? I have only read 80 pages but it has changed me so much in ways I can't explain. It's very different from any other war novel I've read. It's calmer, more peaceful, and seems to be more thoughtful.*
>
> *I find myself wanting all the characters to survive even though that would make a sort of sappy end. In a novel like this, I don't want the good guys to die; I want them to live and be healthy and happy, but I guess it wasn't probably for a whole family to survive. I wonder how Potok will end this. I can't decide whether they will live or die, but I think now that they will all live.*
>
> *Do you know if Potok has written anything after this and where I can write to him? I would like now more than ever to write and send him a letter telling him how much his novels have meant to me. I feel I owe him that for all he has taught and shown me through his novels and characters. I can't imagine myself without reading Potok. It's like a whole new world.*

When Jane shares her experience of reading personally, it helps the transformation of a simple language class into a reading community. Relph points out how places can be "important sources of individual and communal identity" (1976, p. 141). A teacher with pedagogical sensitivities will share a letter like Jane's with other students to show how stories can engage us with such poignancy. Not only is the sharing of Jane's letter positive recognition for her, but also other students may see themselves in her words. In a class like this one, Jane's letter may lead many students to write about their experiences with novels that have a lasting impact on their lives.

On the walls of the reading classroom are lists of books that students recommend for others to read. During the Reading Room often a student is fingering through a small file box containing short annotations of memorable books organized according to genre that students in all my classes have recommended.

Students who encounter literary events that are funny, strange, and disturbing are eager to share these experiences with others. At times the silence of the reading class is shattered with a burst of laughter, a suppressed giggle, or an insistent whisper shot across the classroom to a friend, "You've got to read this!" Not all students delight in sharing their literary interpretations with others, but increasingly more do so as they become at home in the reading community.

> *Before, I was skeptical of the Reading Room process, but it has become one of my favorites. The penbook has made me talk to other students when I didn't feel like it and talk to teachers about my literary feelings (which are usually quite strong). It has increased my awareness of literature and caused me to express myself in an area that I've always kept a secret. Thank you.*

Diane is initially distrustful of the social space or the Reading Room, but time and communication with others through letter writing has resulted in open dialogue with other students and her teacher.

The Space of the Virtual Text

When I announce that this is the first day of the second cycle of Reading Room, the students quickly quieten down and the nature of the class atmosphere becomes more solitary. Each person begins to interact with the literary text. A student composing a letter at the computer in the corner of the classroom, a student writing a letter at her desk, a student reading another classmate's letter, a student engaged in reading his novel, a student staring into space, a teacher writing a response to a student letter—these are textual experiences that belong to the landscape of the Reading Room.

When my students and I read or write, what kind of space do we experience? The space of words? The space of our imagination? The space of story? I do know that this virtual reality generated by the story may be a compelling space of transformation. Such is the reality of reading space. Once we have learned to read and write, it seems difficult not to be drawn by some text. I recall sitting in the doctor's office and absent-mindedly I read the posters on the wall, the announcements and look down casually to page through a woman's magazine. Just as the wet sand of the beach invites footprints, so a text invites us to read. This drawing quality of a text belongs most to novels. The novel asks to be read. It acts like an enchantress who conjures up magical worlds for us. The novel stakes a claim, and in that moment it may teach us, transforming us in some way.

In fiction the possibility of imaginable human experience is revealed. In Reading Room the focus is on the experience of reading even though student writing about novels may take the form of critical responses. However, the reading experience, itself, has primary value. Of course, not all books capture our attentiveness, but those that do may leave us feeling something special--we experience a sense of caring. In a sense, in the space of opening a novel, I open myself to it: I make myself vulnerable to the extent that I may experience feelings that I have never had before. I may never be quite the same.

As I look around the room, my eyes rest on Lana. What kind of space is she in? Obviously she sits at her desk in the community of Reading Room, but where is she really? As she holds her pen in hand and writes, where is she? What kind of place is this writing space about reading for her? I suppose it is a private and personal space because I can only guess what she might be thinking and writing about Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Perhaps, as she writes, she is remembering Frodo's cottage and how very tall Gandalf was as he lectured Frodo about the dangers of the ring, or perhaps Lana is writing about the fireplace in the cottage that she visits every summer that reminds her of the one in the novel.

When I read Lana's Penbook that evening, I discover that she is not writing about her book at all. She is writing about her favorite place to read at home, under an enormous cozy quilt in her bedroom. As I write back to Lana in her Penbook, I tell her about my favorite afghan and how delightful it is to feel snug and secure in our personal world to enter the world of the story. In sharing a similar personal experience with Lana, I show her that I recognize and appreciate that she has discovered a favorite place to read. This action enriches the relationship between student and teacher.

The Pedagogical Space of Reading Room

Our spatial environments always have moods. And these moods have something to do with the way we "feel" ourselves in these spaces. Thus a church has a peaceful calming mood while a factory may advance confusion with the clamoring of machines. A school gymnasium is filled with a mood of energy as students run circuits while a science classroom may evoke catastrophic expectations as a chemistry experiment goes awry. Perhaps the mood of a classroom is not just constituted by the nature of the spatial architecture and environmental features, but also by the activities that go on, and the understanding we have of ourselves in such spaces. The kitchen in a home is not only special because we prepare our meals there, but the kitchen may also be the place where we have our conversations and where we are together as a family. In other words, the spatial and the temporal are constitutive of a situational sense of mood that Martin Heidegger writes about with his idea of *Befindlichkeit*. It is the sense that we have of ourselves in situations. "Literally *Befindlichkeit* means "the way one finds oneself" in the world (1962, pp. 172-188). We have an implicit or felt understanding of ourselves in situations even though it is difficult sometimes to put that understanding into words. When I am involved as a teacher with my students, then I am part of this mood of the Reading Room classroom, this world, in which I practice what I know as a teacher. In other words, my pedagogical practice expresses itself as an active understanding of how I find myself here as a teacher with certain intentions, feelings, passions, inclinations, attitudes, and preoccupations.

For me, Reading Room is a time to listen to my students through their penbook letters as I read them and decide how I am best going to respond to them. It is also a time to look at my students as they read and write—to see how attuned they are to reading and writing. How is Jennie today? Last Reading Room she was restless and slipped out to the bathroom too many times. Is Thomas still reading the same book? Does Nicole spend the entire class writing? Has Eric taken the step to write to a classmate rather than the comfort of writing to me? As a teacher, I believe in trying to see and acknowledge the possible worlds that literature invites children to live in and through, and the transformative effect of a particular reading experience for a child. It is just as important to me, that I recognize personal difficulties that may develop for many children that hinder their engagement with story.

Overlapping Spaces

Writing personal letters to other students or their teacher, rather than journal entries that are kept private, contributes to the social and inner nature of the reading space. The physical, social, personal, and textual spaces in Reading Room are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and even stimulate the development of other spaces, such as the immersion in the space of the story or the space of the writing text. For example, without the physical space of Reading Room filled with thirty students reading novels, the social space of students' writing to each other and exchanging penbooks would not be facilitated. Without the inner space for a student to engage with a story and write a penbook letter about it, there would be no social space of letters to share with others. The epistolary dimension of the penbook letter creates the opportunity for a teacher to respond pedagogically by writing back to her students.

What are other epistolary characteristics of the penbook letter that cause the reading and writing spaces to shift or work together? First, a letter is written to be read by someone whom the writer has in mind. A student knows that another student, the teacher, or parent will be reading the letter and writing a response. Many thoughts may travel through the writer's mind: What do you think of my letter? My ideas? Me? Letter writing seems to carry with it the thrill of creative expression, and consequently, "to compose a letter . . . is to become better conscious of ourselves" (Guillen, 1994, p. 5). In the act of reading a letter, the reader is listening to the writer, trying to understand the other.

The act of letter writing in penbooks is also beneficial for the student as letter-writer. E.M. Cioran notes that "the letter ... represents a major event of solitude" (1996, p. 418). This is the inner space of writing that invites contemplation unlike in e-mail where words and ideas are often abbreviated, written hurriedly, and frequently on the run.

The reader of the penbook letter also receives recognition because the writer has chosen him or her as the recipient of the letter. A student may begin tentatively, " I have never written to you before but ..." and the reader of the letter often responds with encouraging or confirming sentiments.

In her response to Kate's letter, Janice is not only congratulatory about Kate's willingness to try a new genre, but also relies on Kate's judgment for her next book choice:

Dear Kate,

It is excellent that you succeeded in reading and enjoying a new genre. I know many people who do not enjoy trying new things and they stick to one genre. This makes you a very flexible reader.

I enjoyed Invitation to the Game and I am sure that in the future I will read another novel by Monica Hughes. I have met Monica Hughes in elementary and she truly is a wonderful and imaginative person. I am glad you enjoyed this book so much. It seems very interesting and perhaps I will read it this term. You have left me in suspense! I want to find out how the Guardian changed Olwen and if Mark will love her back in spite of it.

It is very clever how you noticed similarities between this novel and the "Iron-barred Door." Is it similar because the guardian turns out to be a robot (this is a guess)? No, don't tell me. I want to find out by myself. Was it a good guess, though?

Your friend,
Janice

In the writing of Kate's letter and in Janice's response, the physical, inner, social, and textual spaces of Reading Room shift back and forth in experiential prominence. Kate engages with her own private thoughts as she composes her letter, then physically delivers her letter to Janice by walking quietly to Janice's desk. In handing the penbook to Janice and expecting a response, Kate has interacted socially. Through reading Kate's letter, Janice has explored the space of the text, and in her own inner reality has composed a personal response. These spaces blend and mix to create a distinctive reading and writing space.

Introducing the Program

The purposes of this program are many, but the primary focus is the creation of a space for reading, reflecting, and writing about novels in the language arts program. There are specific rules that students are expected to learn and follow, and the language arts teacher also has responsibilities. Sufficient time and practice is required to familiarize students with the program. Once students understand the routines and expectations of the class, the program seems to "run itself."

I introduce Reading Room to students during the first week of school through a letter of explanation. Students receive many handouts during the year that relate to Reading Room, and are expected to file them in a special section of their language arts binder.

Student letter

> *Dear Student:*
> *The separate USSR periods, as we knew them from previous years, have been discontinued and relegated back to language arts. Instead, we will be involved for the second year in a reading program called "Reading Room." The purpose of Reading Room is to create a space in the language arts program dedicated to books: novels, stories, poems, and other literary sources. You will be expected to read many books and reflect on your reading experiences in a special space called the "Reading Penbook." You were asked on your supply list to purchase a 100 page scribbler (no coils) for this purpose to fit into the special box storage.*
> *Your reading penbook is a place for you and your classmates to write letters this year about books, reading, authors, and even about writing itself. You will be reflecting about literature in these letters and I, a classmate, or parent will write letters back to you. All of our letters will remain in our personal penbooks, arranged chronologically, as a record of the kind of thinking, learning, and reading that we share together.*
> *In your letters you are invited to write to us about what you have read: Write what you notice, what you think and feel and why. Write what you like or do not like and why. Write about how you read and why. Write what these books say and mean to you. Ask questions or ask for help, and respond to others about their ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions. As a bare minimum for passing Reading Room, you must write at least one letter every cycle in your own penbook. A cycle contains two Reading*

Room classes, and usually fits into one week. I should be the recipient of a letter from you at least once every two cycles. These are only minimum requirements; you may write a letter as often as you wish. You may write letters and respond to letters both during and outside Reading Room period.

When you write to me, put your penbook in the mailbox on the corner of my desk. When you write to a classmate, date your letter and give your penbook to him or her. When a friend gives you his or her penbook, you must answer within twenty-four hours. After you have written back, file your friend's penbook, correctly by number, in the designated storage box in the language arts room. Do not return the penbook to your friend during the class as you will disturb his or her reading. You may not lose or damage another student's penbook. Unless a penbook is being written in, it should be on file, numerically arranged, in the box.

Please date your letters in the upper right-hand corner. Number the pages of the penbook, as in any book (page 1 - 100). Write the title of the book about which you are reading or writing and the name of the author. The proper way to indicate the title of a book is to capitalize and underline it (e.g., Tiger Eyes by Judy Blume). Titles of stories or poems should be capitalized and in quotation marks (e.g., "By the Numbers" in The Toynbee Convector by Ray Bradbury). If you are writing on the computer, you may format your title in italics.

Finally, enter the title, author, completion date, and number of pages of each book you finish this year on the log sheet in the back cover of your penbook. This record will serve you and me as a quick reference.

Your collection of letters will provide roughly ten per cent of your grade in language arts this term. You will do well if you read regularly, write often, correspond about your thoughts on literature with involvement and care, and follow the procedures outlined above.

I look forward to your letters. I am interested in learning with you, in helping you learn more, and in learning from you.

Your teacher,

At the same time that students are beginning the Reading Room program, I send home a letter to parents to inform them also. I have found that parents are vital and valuable allies in supporting this reader response program, and I am able to field any questions during the open house that many parents attend later that month. The letter that follows is an example of one that I have distributed to parents.

Parent letter

> *Dear Parents:*
>
> *I would like to take this opportunity to review with you a reading and writing program within language arts, just in case your children have not passed on the information to you. For many years at Smith School, students were involved in USSR (uninterrupted sustained silent reading) in their homeroom classes. A number of years ago USSR was discontinued and the time was returned to language arts. As a result of this change, I initiated a program, called "Reading Room," in my grade eight and nine classes. Students experienced a modified Reading Room program last year.*
>
> *Reading Room is designed to create a space for books or literature in the language arts program. During Reading Room periods, students must have a book in their possession when the class begins. Students are required to read a book--not magazines or newspapers in which text competes with pictures--preferably one that tells a story such as novels, histories and biographies. During Reading Room I discourage nonfiction books of lists or facts where readers do not sustain plot attention, do not build up speed, and do not necessarily grow to love good stories.*
>
> *On the first day of class students were asked to acquire a scribbler, now called Reading Penbook. The penbook is a place where students are invited to reflect on their reading experiences by writing letters to their teacher, classmates, and even their parents. These letters should be concerned with what is read, what is noticed, liked and disliked, and about*

methods of reading, personal meaning of books, and questions about the reading process.

The minimum requirements of Reading Room involve the writing of at least one letter every second Reading Room. I must be the recipient of one letter every fourth Reading Room. The students are asked to respond thoughtfully to letters received from other students and read in a sustained fashion for the entire period when not engaged in writing about reading. They need to follow other rules designed to ensure that the reading period works effectively. I respond in writing to all letters that are addressed to me. Of course, students need to read regularly at home in order to fulfill their Reading Room requirements.

Students are asked to record the title and author of each book completed this year on the log sheet in the back cover of their penbook. This record serves as a quick reference for me to monitor quantity and quality of literature read.

Reading Room will comprise about 20 per cent of each student's grade in the three language arts terms. Three personal goals related to the reading process are also included in this grade. Students will do well in this area if they read regularly, write often, and correspond about their thoughts on literature with involvement and care. You can help your child succeed and enjoy the Reading Room experience by doing any of the following:

Check your child's log-sheet to see what he or she has read and is currently reading.

Read the same book as your child and have a discussion.

Recommend a good book for your child to read.

If your child is absent from school, make sure that he or she makes up the time (minimum of 30 minutes) missed reading or writing in Reading Room. You need to provide a note.

Keep an eye on what your child is reading. If you feel a book is inappropriate please ask him or her to keep it at home.

Check the recommended book list and encourage your child to read many of these books. Most of them can be signed out at the local public library or at our school library.
Buy books for special occasions.

I feel privileged, indeed, to experience both the joy and challenge that your children bring to my world at Smith School.
Yours sincerely,
Judith van Manen
Language Arts Teacher

Setting up the Program

In the next month students are introduced to other aspects of the program usually in the form of ten or fifteen minute mini-lessons before students begin to read and/or write in their penbooks. A first lesson is the outlining of the Reading Room rules. These expectations are revisited when necessary.

Rules for Reading Room periods

(1) Students must read for the entire period. (Students who are writing in penbooks are exceptions.)

(2) Students cannot do homework or read any material for another class. Reading Room is not a study hall.

(3) Students must read a book (no magazines or newspapers in which text competes with pictures), preferably one that tells a story (e.g., novels, histories and biographies rather than nonfiction books of lists or facts where readers cannot sustain attention, build up speed and fluency, or grow to love good stories.)

(4) Students must have a book in their possession when the class begins; this is the main responsibility involved in coming prepared to this class. Go to the school library before Reading Room. The

library is open before school, at noon, and after school for signing out books. (Students who finish a book during the Reading Room are obvious exceptions and may visit the library.)

(5) Students may not talk to others or in any other way disturb others.

(6) There are no washroom or drinking fountain breaks to disturb me or other readers. In an absolute emergency, a student may simply slip out and slip back in again as quietly as possible if no other students are out of the classroom. Abuse of this privilege may result in suspension of washroom privileges.

(7) A student who is absent can make up time and receive points by reading at home (with a note from a parent for a minimum of 30 minutes) or at school after school. Notes should be received within **two weeks** of the absence. Students who are absent may write penbook letters (now called make-up letters) any time during the term.

(8) There are three computers in the class available for word processing letters. You must book a computer ahead of time. If any of the computers is unoccupied you may use them. After you have finished typing your letter and printing it, you should continue reading.

(9) Points accumulated for following the above rules constitute up to 20% of the term.

(10) Students may choose to write two penbook letters at a later time during the term. These late letters are called letter extensions. Students are allowed to use two letter extensions for each term.

Extension letters must be completed within **one week** of date of request.

At least half of one Reading Room should be devoted to the setting up of the penbook. Many students need to be shown exemplars of what penbook letters look like. A useful handout is one that lists suggestions on what to write about in letters. Students staple it to the front inside cover of their penbooks.

Letter Content Suggestions

What should you write in your letters?

- Comments, questions, and predictions.
- Comments telling what you like, dislike or notice about the author's language, techniques, or ideas.
- Connections with other books that you have read or films you have seen.
- Questions can be about whatever you don't understand. Speculate about possible answers.
- Predictions can be about what will happen next or what might happen if the story or novel had continued.
- Plot summaries.
- Character and story event descriptions.
- Theme discussions.
- Ideas about the reading process.
- Reflections on how the novel relates to your own life.

Note: Letters that show little or no reflective ability or reference to story events will lower your Reading Room mark. Eight to twelve letters (includes letters to teacher, parent, friend) will be evaluated each term.

Organization of the penbook includes discussion of the Penbook Log, labeling the term and dating individual letters, creating headings, numbering pages, and setting up of goals. The Penbook Log is stapled to the back cover of the penbook. The actual log has 24 entry spaces. After the first six months, most students will have read 24 books or more.

Penbook log

Book Title	*Author*	# of Pages	Date Completed

During the first weeks of Reading Room, rules require review so that they become routines. The teacher should quickly check that all students have a book before the class begins. In the last five minutes of the class, the teacher records on her class list which students have sustained reading and/or writing as well as who have written penbook letters. Initially, students will often question why they need to write about the books that they read so it is wise to be proactive and introduce the topic as a mini-lesson. The following handout is used as a starting point as well as student testimonials from other years.

Penbook letters

> *Why do you need to write letters about what you read?*
>
> *You learn by talking and writing. After you read a story, poem, or chapter in a novel, it is important for you to reflect on what you have read. By writing your response, you will form your own ideas; in this way you will become a better reader able to understand and critique more challenging literature.*

Throughout the year, the first ten or fifteen minutes of the Reading Room class are devoted to subjects related to reading, books, and writing about reading. Topics include how to write more reflective letters, promotion of new books, author talks, trying new genres, abandoning books, how to choose a good book, favorite books, movie adaptations of books, sharing of excellent penbook letters, and topics suggested by the students themselves.

Students are expected to set three personal goals for themselves after they have experienced one term of Reading Room. The goals can be as simple as increasing the frequency of reading at home or trying a new genre. Often, the teacher sets one goal for the entire class. This may take the form of an assignment that substitutes for one of the letters in the term but is written during Reading Room in the penbook. (See Appendix 9.) The teacher files these goals in a folder after she approves their appropriateness while each student copies the goals into the penbook so they can be accessed throughout the term. Such a goal as "I am going to do better in Reading Room" is too general while "I am going to get 85% in Reading Room" is too specific. At least one goal should be related to an area shown to be in need of improvement on the last evaluation of Reading Room. Students receive a copy of the goal handout to be completed and handed in to the teacher.

Reading Room goals and evaluation

Term __3__

Name: ____________________________ Date: _________________________

In Reading Room, I will try to accomplish these three goals:

- I will read at least three books that I have never read before from the junior high reading list.
- ____
  ____
- ____
  ____

Self-Evaluation

Student's Signature: __________________________________

Teacher's Signature: __________________________________

In this goal handout, students are expected to read a minimum of three books from the junior high reading list, a list of over 300 books that I have compiled over the last ten years often from recommended lists for young adult readers in various library journals. (See Appendix 3.) All the books on the list are in the school library, and are often available from local public libraries also. At the end of the term students evaluate how well they have met their goals. The teacher has the choice of raising or lowering the assessments if students are overly generous or too hard on themselves. Most students are very honest in their self-assessments. Other examples of teacher set goals are located in the Appendix 9.

Evaluation of penbook letters occurs at the end of the term. The Reading Room mark is composed of three weighted areas: Rules of Reading Room (following rules, number of books read), the penbook (organization, quality of letters), and goal evaluation. The penbook letter collection is weighted most heavily.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the main components of the Reading Room program as I have developed it over ten or more years. Without this outline the dissertation would not be intelligible. At the centre of the Reading Room program is the penbook letter writing in which students reflect through writing on their reading of novels. Penbook writing is an epistolary activity. Epistolarity is not a common notion in language arts curricula; therefore, the next chapter will explore the meaning and significance of the epistolatory dimensions of penbook letter writing.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EPISTOLARITY OF WRITING ABOUT READING

To write is to read and to read is to write. In writing the student reads the letter for him or herself, but the student also reads the letter for how the addressee (the teacher, fellow student, parent) might read it. Most often students write to me, their teacher, and I write responsively to each letter students write. Intially students tend to be apologetic in their letters. They apologize for the shortness of letters, legibility of writing, not having read enough to write a "good" letter or for what is crossed out. To write about reading complicates the writing because students read what they write about what they read. And that is also true for me, their teacher. Writing and reading penbook letters sponsors various forms of reflectivity--penbook letters make students and the teacher into reader/writers.

The epistolary situation evokes simultaneously the acts of writing and reading, as correspondents alternate, often within the same letter. Reader consciousness explicitly informs the act of writing itself, and thus turns into writer consciousness, and vice versa. In writing about their reading and in reading their writing students engage themselves in a hermeneutic process. I have noticed in penbook letters that a student may discuss an interpretation of what he or she has read, and then immediately refute the interpretation as a misunderstanding. In a way this is like Gadamer's notion of the reader projecting “a meaning of the whole” (1976) which is not supported as he or she continues to read.

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He (She) projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text... [T]he initial meaning emerges only because he (she) is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as

> he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.
> (Gadamer, 1975, p. 267)

The act of writing about the story is like reading further into the story and making new discoveries, which causes the reader to revise his or her initial interpretation.

The movement from the private to the public in epistolary text lays bare a paradox: as a reflection of self, or the self's relationships, the letter connotes privacy and intimacy; yet as a document addressed to another (teacher, fellow student, parent), the letter reflects the need for an audience, an audience that may suddenly expand when that document is shared or discussed.

In this chapter, I explicate three epistolary dimensions of the penbook letter and describe the penbook letter as a substantive medium for language arts learning as well as a highly sensitive medium for acquiring pedagogical insights into children's lives. The epistolary structure of the penbook letter is inherently suited to establish pedagogical relations with students. Thus, I aim to show how reflection on penbook writing provides me, as a teacher, with rich, formative insights into personal being and becoming, and into subjective understandings of my students.

Penbook letters are records of my experiences of teaching and those of my students. They contain memories and imaginings—past, present, and future, written and alluded to, over more than ten years of teaching reading through reader response.

The Exchange Dimension

What makes this reader response approach distinguishable from memoir, journal, and other first person narratives? It is the focus on epistolary discourse in the form of the penbook letter. The letter is marked by the inclusion of an addressor and an addressee, the one who receives the letter. The addressee is expected to respond to the letter and initiate ideas. In *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Gurkin Altman points out that, "The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him” (1982, pp. 88). This reciprocity is a kind of exchange. “How are you?” is often an implicit understanding. As Altman (1982) explains: “If there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of the letter. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world. (p. 89)

How does this epistolary pact work? A student begins by responding to a literary text, but with a particular audience or addressee in mind. The student writes to a designated other, a person that he or she is beginning to know or already has a shared relationship with. Not only is the student's letter read by a teacher, classmate, or parent, but the addressee of the letter also writes back to the author of the letter. Thus, the personal letter, unlike other writing genres such as the essay, journal, or story, alerts students to the Other.

It is not surprising that the perceived audience affects how the student writes his or her letter. Some students prefer to write to the teacher all of the time; other students are comfortable writing to the same friends, while a few students write many of their letters to parents. It is not easy to write to someone for the first time. In fact, the thought of writing to someone new may be so risky that some students set a Reading Room goal of writing to new people from one term to the next. In the penbook, the student's ideas are exposed for someone else to see. A student may be embarrassed about his or her revelations, or even spelling mistakes or illegible handwriting. Often students apologize for their messy writing or make excuses for having little to say. As students are expected to discuss the novel that they are reading, the recipient of the letter may notice that the book being discussed is too easy or immature for the expected grade level of that student. So, some students may be reluctant to risk being exposed.

The addressee of the letter shapes the language that the writer uses. The language that a student uses in writing to a friend is often casual and even may resonate with expressions of “teen talk,” while the tone the student adopts in writing to the teacher tends to be more formal and often tentative. As students become more confident in thinking about their reading and comfortable with the developing pedagogical relationship with their teacher, the tone of letters tends to even out and often it is difficult to distinguish between student/teacher letters and student/student letters.

For example, this letter is written from Susan, a grade nine girl to a grade nine boy, and the tone is serious and candid:

> *I am writing you a letter in hopes of convincing you how great my favorite book is. It's called Bloomabilty, and as I told you before, I practically grew up on this book. The main character's name is Dinnie. Her family is poor and as a result they never live anywhere for more than six months. She never has time to settle down, make friends, and become comfortable. Dinnie is so busy trying to fit in with the people from her new home that she never has time to find herself and realize who she is. Dinnie's uncle receives a new job as headmaster at a boarding school in Switzerland, and he welcomes Dinnie to come and attend the school, free of cost. Her family can't say no to such an offer. So Dinnie moves to the beautiful country of Switzerland, expecting things to be no different from any of her other moves.*
>
> *Here's the part where I can relate to something we were talking about just the other day. Remember the conversation about how environment has a lot of effects on our relationships? Well, this book proves that point. Dinnie finds the boarding school to be more accepting than anything she has ever experienced. Kids from tons of different races and cultures attend the school, and it is so unlike our culture, where everyone tries to be exactly the same. The people in Switzerland embrace differences. The environment of the school is the kind of environment where nothing is fake, and relationships are a reflection of the environment.*
>
> *So, it's not until people accept Dinnie, that she accepts herself and finally becomes comfortable being who she is. Sadly, this is the case with most of*

> *us; we need others to tell us we are accepted until we can finally believe the same thing about ourselves.*
>
> *However, more than anything else, this book is about the purest of friendships. The kind we dream about. These kids don't need a society to tell them what equals happiness. They find it in the simplest things. The mountains, the fresh air, the book they are reading, and above all, each other.*
>
> *I cry almost every time that I read this book, only because I'm sad I don't have what Dinnie finds.*

Susan takes the risk of sharing with her classmate personal revelations she has made about relationships and finding meaning in life. She even writes about her sadness in living in a world that lacks what the protagonist in the novel has discovered. This letter is personal and invites the addressee to respond in a supportive manner. The letter is also a continuation of an earlier conversation between the two students showing the significance of the exchange dimension of the penbook letter.

The Mediatory Dimension

The writing of penbook letters makes sharing both easy and difficult for the student and teacher. Through writing one can address the other but writing itself is cumbersome. Students at the beginning of a response journal approach like Reading Room often complain, "Why can't we just read? Why do we have to write letters?" But in time students discover that writing letters enables mediated understandings and sometimes misunderstandings. Each student engages in dialogue with the text of a novel and learns how to open this text, and how to recognize what it says to him or her, and how to place his or her misunderstandings. In face-to-face conversation, this personal confidence may not occur. On the other hand, a penbook letter can also be impersonal for students. It may be more difficult in ordinary conversations to hide one's immediate feelings. For the teacher, the penbook letter opens a space for personal interactions with her students.

The penbook letter has the potential to bridge understanding between the writer and the addressee, but also may serve to create distance. As a student writes a letter to his or her teacher, the student is aware of the effect that this letter may have on the teacher, and at the same time, the student himself or herself is affected in knowing that the teacher will read the letter. So, the writer of the letter may choose to emphasize either the distance or the closeness of the exchange although the distance seems to disappear as the exchanges grow.

Altman explains how "to write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing (1982, p. 119). Both the writer and addressee of the letter refer to letters and responses that were written in the past as well as common experiences and conversations that they have had in or out of class (as can be seen in Susan's letter). They share a history together that expands as more letters are written. However, there may be differences in opinions between the writer and the addressee. This is a sign of a genuine exchange.

In this letter Justin shares a strong opinion about the relationship between novel studies and reader enjoyment.

> *I have just finished the book The Pearl by John Steinbeck. It is about a poor pearl fisherman named Kino and his wife Juana and his son Coyotito. One morning Coyotito is bitten by a scorpion and the family seeks the help of a local doctor. The doctor refuses to help Coyotito until he is paid. While pearling the next day, Kino finds an enormous pearl and it becomes the object of everyone's desires. The entire village wants the pearl and this constant pressure on Kino eventually becomes too great and he is forced to run away with his family and the pearl. His family is pursued by bounty hunters and Coyotito ends up getting shot by one of the bounty hunters.*
> *I found this to be a hollow read. I once spent an entire term on this book analyzing every square inch of it, and after spending that much time on it, I*

> *am left with a bad taste in my mouth. I agree that analyzing great works of literature helps build a better understanding of novels and the different layers of a book, but in moderation. Once a person has been exposed to a book for too long, he no longer finds it enjoyable. It is the same with anything. When you have an item constantly around you, until it becomes part of the fiber of your existence, it is damaging. Books are meant to be read, not to be obsessed over. John Steinbeck is a marvelous author and he put great thought into this book, but some of the thrill of reading is discovering these layers for yourself, not having them pointed out.*

The action of choosing to write a letter to a particular person rather than to someone else is another aspect of the mediatory dimension of epistolary narrative. In writing to his teacher, the student validates the addressee of the letter. "I trust and respect you enough to share what I think and ask for your feedback," the writer may seem to say to the addressee. There is no hesitation in Justin's letter as he criticizes a typical approach that many English teachers including his own teacher employ in the teaching of language arts. Not all letters are as validating as Justin's letter. Many penbook letters especially as students initially begin to write to their teacher and other students take the form of "This is what I am reading," "What are you reading?" and "Can you recommend a really good book?" It is in the tension between these hesitant and naïve beginnings and the eventual powerful letters that students are capable of producing that the pedagogical power of Reading Room can be gleaned.

The Time Dimension

The student writes the penbook letter in present time although he or she may be referring to past events or future possibilities. The letter is "anchored in present time from which he [the student] looks toward both past and future events" (Altman,1982, p. 118). Since the meaning of the letter is always relative to the present, there are frequent possibilities of making connections between past story events and present situations in the plot of the novel or even in the student's personal life. So, the epistolary narrative is well suited to analysis of literary events. There tends to be a preoccupation with future events especially as the writer of the letter makes predictions about what will happen next or expresses hope or apprehension about characters in the novel which may even translate into real uncertainties about the writer's life.

For example, in this letter Mary, a grade nine student, reflects on death after reading Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*.

> *This book has taught me more about human nature and emotions than anything I've ever done, read, or seen before.*
>
> *This book deals with death, manipulation, sacrifice, and epiphanies. I never expected to find a quote in this book but I did:*
>
> *"This time, everything had stopped the way a watch stops, and the pain was her body and her body was the pain and she knew exactly what had happened and what was going to happen. The gun had gone off. She was caught again between inhale and exhale. The pain. . .wow. . .breath caught dying mommy and daddy I can't breathe and nobody to tell me if I was bra… (p. 221)"*
>
> *The quote I chose is that of a sixteen year old girl in the quick milliseconds before her death. The reason I chose this quote is because it fascinates me. It draws me in and makes me think. What do people think before they die? What are their last moments filled with? Do they realize that they're dying? Are they scared?*
>
> *This quote also brings up a thought of time. The girl was shot directly into her heart but her thoughts were plentiful. Did time slow? Did her brain give her extra time? Maybe her heart stopped but her brain kept working overtime—allowing the girl some mere and paltry last thoughts before it shut off. Or maybe it was her soul thinking: her physical being and thoughts finished but her mind still working away until it was forced to leave.*
>
> *I can't imagine dying—that's why this quote intrigues me. Death is in a sense, the final frontier, the last unexplored/unexplained phenomenon of our natural lives. That's why this quote intrigues me because I know nothing of death.*

> *I love this quote—I've never read anything like it. It seems slow and methodical but rushed and timed. Reading this quote makes my head flood with thoughts and emotions. I think that it's amazing.*

Because this letter raised questions that I have often encountered in working with adolescents, I received permission from Mary to share it with the class. This led to a class discussion about death, afterlife, and religion and subsequently many students in the class also read *After the First Death*, the catalyst for Macy's letter.

Because there is a gap in time between writing the letter and receiving the letter, the present time for the writer of the letter is the past time for the addressee. This disparity in time may be expressed as the addressee approaches the letter with "You thought this when you read that, " rather than "You are thinking this when you read this." By the time the writer reads the addressee's response, he or she has moved on to other facets of the novel. A kind of revisiting of the letter written in the past occurs through the response from the addressee. Even though epistolary discourse is marked by gaps in time, when the writer is writing, he or she is "writing to the moment, speaking to the addressee as if he were present" (1982, p. 140).

Conclusion

Literary theory tends to be more preoccupied with reading than with writing of literary works. Interestingly the writing dimension of literature tends to fall out of the critical work of literary theorists. This is unfortunate for teachers of language arts who are concerned equally with writing as with reading of literary material. In the next chapter I seek out the implications of writing about reading in the study of literary theory. I focus on selected theorists who seem to have the most to say about this topic.

CHAPTER FOUR

LITERARY THEORY: READING AND WRITING

Exploring Conceptions of Reading, Writing, Meaning, and Identity

In this chapter, I explore conceptions of reading and writing in literary theory as presented in three selected texts, and I further examine the consequences of these conceptions for processes of epistolatory writing, the construction of meaning, and experiences of identity formation and development. I focus especially on Rabinowitz's *Before Reading* (1987), Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader* (1990), and Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice* (1995); other texts used are listed in the reference section. I have selected these three literary theorists as their ideas about the reading process may be connected to reader-response theory and criticism. Rabinowitz is chosen because he is a good representative of the reader-response theorists. He borrows from theorists such as Jonathan Culler, Stanley Fish, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., David Bleich, Norman Holland, and Wolfgang Iser. Appleyard is selected because of the relationship of his work to Rosenblatt and his attentiveness to the adolescent reader as an interpreter of texts. Finally, Nussbaum is especially relevant because of her interest in the reader's literary experiences as sources for self-reflection.

Rabinowitz's Before Reading

What literary theories or perspectives underlie Peter J. Rabinowitz's ideas in his book, *Before Reading*? Rabinowitz speaks of "rules of making meaning of narrative" and he reviews ideas contained in the literary theories of new criticism, structuralism, and reader-response criticism. Subsequently, he presents a way of approaching reading a narrative that he calls "authorial reading," that is based on reader-response theory. It emphasizes the centrality of the experience of the reader and the act of reading as the topos for the construction of meaning. In specifying what he sees as the set of rules for narrative interpretation, Rabinowitz employs Culler's idea of "literary competence" that assumes the reader relies on conventions of reading to make meaning of the text.

According to Rabinowitz, reading is an act of "recovery" of meaning and this meaning emerges through the reader's actions of "simplifying" the narrative by "patterning" it (Rabinowitz, 1987, p. 19). Patterning involves strategies such as making some parts of the text more noticeable than others, employing symbolism, and ignoring aspects of the text. Some strategies are privileged over others:

> A text, then, has a hierarchical organization of details: we do not attend to everything equally. To be sure, there are many forms of attention. Some features of a text are rich or evocative, others are strange, others surprising, others climactic. But whatever their specific character, their weight in our reading experience is variable. (p. 53)

In Rabinowitz's view, the reader of a text does not necessarily coincide with the consumer who buys the book. He seems to treat the idea of reader as a construct wherein the reader and the text are not really distinct or independent from one another. In the act of reading, this reader becomes the "authorial audience" or the identity whom the author of the narrative hypothetically considers the audience to be. He suggests that the authorial audience then also may be called the "hypothetical reader." And in becoming a hypothetical reader, the individual "chooses" to become, what Rabinowitz calls, a "corrupted reader." A strange expression perhaps. But the reader is "corrupted" in the act of reading when the values and beliefs that are to be accepted for meaning to occur (or for the story to make sense) may be contrary to the reader's belief system. In Rabinowitz's terms, the actual reader "agrees" to "join the authorial audience" (p. 26) and "questions" the identity of the kind of reader for whom the writer wrote. He suggests that the actual reader, in becoming the authorial audience, should attempt to recognize the author's intention, including "beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, and stampedings of pity and terror" (p. 26). It may not always be clear whether Rabinowitz's "rules" for reading are prescriptive or descriptive of the narrative reality of the person who reads a story, poem, or novel.

For Rabinowitz the act of reading becomes "the joining of a particular social/interpretive community; that is, the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers" (p. 22). Here his ideas resonate with those of Stanley Fish (1980) who also stresses the social context of communities of readers. Not only is this a sharing part of the reading experience, but authorial reading is "a way of talking about how you read" (p. 22). The construction of narrative meaning, says Rabinowitz, is "the result of a community agreement that allows discussion of a certain sort to take place by treating meanings in a particular way..." (p. 22).

Rabinowitz's main concern is with one aspect of the authorial audience. He examines the literary conventions that this audience applies to the text in order to make meaning of the narrative. The elements that interact to form the reader's interpretation are aspects such as the reader's prior knowledge of the conventions of the text and what he or she brings to the experience of reading in terms of his or her social and cultural perspectives. Rabinowitz uses a unique metaphor of an unassembled swing set to describe the text and its relationship to reading.

> [The text] is a concrete thing that, when completed, offers opportunities (more or less restricted depending on the particular swing set involved) for free play, but you have to assemble it first. It comes with rudimentary directions, but you have to know what directions are, as well as how to perform basic tasks. It comes with its own materials, but you must have certain tools of your own at hand. Most important, the instructions are virtually meaningless unless you know, beforehand, what sort of an object you are aiming at. If you have never seen a swing set before, your chances of riding on the trapeze without cracking open your head are slight. (1987, p. 38)

Without knowledge of and experience with the conventions in the text, or in the case of the swing set, the directions and mechanical practice for assembling it, the reader or swing set assembler cannot begin. More important, both parties require a cultural context to create an end product. The assembler needs a picture of what the swing set is and how it functions while the reader possesses an already existing framework for making sense of the reading experience.

Understanding the concept of authorial reading as a way of approaching the text is important, Rabinowitz explains, because this is the kind of reading that teachers tend to practice with their students in classrooms. Secondly, authorial reading provides the foundation for other kinds of reading that depend on authorial meaning to exist. For example, books that present political criticism would collapse without a political system to criticize. Rabinowitz believes that pure authorial reading has limitations because the passage of time that brings with it social and historical changes prevents the actual reader from becoming the ideal authorial audience, but Rabinowitz does maintain that reading as an authorial audience is necessary before critical reading (reading from other perspectives) even becomes possible. Rather than discounting the importance of authorial reading, Rabinowitz, argues that the role of authorial audience is the important "starting point" for the reader.

Rabinowitz makes no explicit references to writing. One wonders if his rules for making meaning in the act of reading could be converted into rules for seeking meaning in the process of writing. The actual reader makes assumptions about the author's intention so if asked to write about a narrative the reader would possibly write from the perspective of the authorial audience. But the very idea of "audience" has a passive ring to it: an audience listens but does not necessarily speak. Perhaps, for Rabinowitz, the relationship of reading to writing-about-reading would lie in the reader's recognition of the authorial intention of the narrative. Rabinowitz constructs authorial intention as an acceptance on the reader's part to "read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers" (p. 22), but how would this reading allow for critical writing? Or how would this reading be a resource for writing about personal concerns of the reader? While Rabinowitz does allow for a reflective process upon reading that transcends the state of authorial audience, he does not go very far in showing how the actual reader emerges from this role.

Rabinowitz's notion of authorial audience is based on the idea that authors have a sense of the audience (readers) for whom they are writing and what the social and cultural influences are like for this audience. So, there is then an assumed relationship between the writer and the reader. And yet, he suggests that the writer can make an infinite number of assumptions about his or her readers. These assumptions provide for literary decisions that the author makes during the writing such as what to include, omit, emphasize, and so on. However, the pedagogical issue is that when students write to other students or to their teacher about the books they are reading, they also may be making assumptions about the supposed authorial audience of the author; and they may or may not identify with the implied conventionality (passivity) of the rules of meaning-making of this audience. For example, when Jackie writes to me as teacher she assumes perhaps that I will be critical of her spelling and grammatical efforts and so she writes, "I hope you don't notice too many of my mistakes. I have always been a poor speller and grammar isn't much better."

In spite of the limited frame of authorial audience for the notion of the reader as a writer, are there any ideas from reading Rabinowitz's work that provide insights into the ways in which adolescent readers may explore and form their identities? Briefly, and for the purposes of here, I will simplify the experience of "identity" to mean what Margaret Rustin describes as "the in-between space between family and social world which children begin to negotiate" (Rustin, 1987, p. 3) in the adolescent years. Jerome Bruner's (1986) idea of the narrative "Self" is also relevant. He thinks of Self as "a text about how one is situated with respect to others and toward the world," and he speaks of a canonical text in terms of "powers and skills and dispositions that change as one's situation changes from young to old, from one kind of setting to another" (Bruner, 1986, p. 130). For example, students sometimes reflect on the way they were in previous years in terms of the books they read and their level of maturity. In other words, students narrate a new sense of awareness of self. Ricoeur (1994) has shown how identity is tied up in the narratives that people tell and retell of themselves. From Rabinowitz's work, two pedagogical questions related to the adolescent reader and identity formation seem to present themselves:

1. What happens to self-identity and imagined identity of the "Other" when the adolescent assumes the role of "corrupted reader" who must feel or believe in things that he or she does not feel or believe in?
2. Are some books better starting points than other books for the student to be cast in the role of an authorial audience who experiences conflicting feeling, values, beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes?

Here is an example of a student penbook letter that may begin to address these questions. It is a letter excerpt written by a grade nine student Randy to her teacher about William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. She starts by quoting a passage from the book.

> *I was struck by these passages that were very powerful and spoke to me in some way:*
> *"For a moment he (Ralph) had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood—Simon was dead—and Jack had …*
> *Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy." (Golding, 1954, p. 223)*
> *These passages are both in the last page of the book, and I thought they tied the whole story together. They summed up the story. I'm glad that this was not an open-ended book. I really liked how Golding gave a very strong conclusion at the end. The first passage uses imagery and includes a simile. How the island looks relates to the emotions that the group of boys*

> *went through while on the island. Before, the island seemed to be paradise. The boys were happy to get away from adults, and expected to have a really fun time on the island while meeting new friends. Instead, they encountered fear, destruction, death, pain, struggle, and loneliness. The fire was very significant to the story. The ship wouldn't have come to finally rescue the boys without Jack and his tribe's burning of the island. This fortunately interrupted the manhunt for Ralph and also created the mood for the events to follow. First of all, the fire spreading quickly throughout the island created a mood of tension and panic when Ralph was trying to delay his death. The scorching of the island at the end emphasized "the darkness of man's heart" in Ralph. He went through many emotions and hard times, symbolized by "darkness" during this experience.*
>
> *Also, the second quote made me feel sympathetic for Ralph. This sentence made Ralph come alive. I thought that I knew him so well. I liked how Golding told us everything that Ralph was weeping for. This showed me his feelings throughout the story. I know that Ralph will always remember this experience although it was not a happy one. The dark scar will always stay within his heart, and Ralph will always remember his friend Piggy. Although Ralph misjudged Piggy's character in the beginning, he was able to value the importance of their friendship when Piggy was his only support. I think he now feels regret for how he treated Piggy, but also glad that he had met this friend. I don't think that he will ever forget Jack or Simon either. Ralph realizes right now that he must face the guilt of contributing to the murder of two of his friends.*

In this letter, Randy is making use of strategies that Rabinowitz calls conventions or rules of meaning making to determine what is important in the story. Randy demonstrates an implicit awareness that some conventions occupy privileged positions. The last page of a story offers to her answers to questions of making meaning. She is able to "tie the whole story together" by recognizing that story endings are significant. There is also transformation or interpretation of the "'scorched'" island simile to make the story coherent and to bring closure in a satisfying way for the student. Randy feels sympathy for Ralph and infers that he will live with the guilt of Piggy's death forever. The experience will "always stay in his heart." Questions about Randy's own identity (in terms of the place of guilt in her own world) seem to surface here. In many reading experiences, the kinds of questions a student may ask that relate to identification with characters' feelings and situations likely occur after the student "locates" and "notices" the conventions. Thus, an analytic device such as Rabinowitz's rules of meaning may have diagnostic possibilities as a valuable starting point in determining how the student is reading.

Of course, it may happen that, sometimes, the student who writes about reading may experience a strong sense of tension or conflict with the position the reader must accept in order for the story to be believable or even meaningful. Different students may interact and struggle in unique ways with what Rabinowitz calls the perspective of the authorial audience. This theme of interactive variability of reading plays a central role in Joseph A. Appleyard's literary theory.

Appleyard's Becoming a Reader

Appleyard pays positive attention to reader-oriented critical theory to explain what reading is and considers any literary theory that can be subsumed in hermeneutics to be relevant. He terms the literary theory that is closest to his idea "transactional" or "interactional," and relates to the work of Iser, Rosenblatt, and Holland. In order for reading to occur, he says, the reader and text interact in a "feedback loop."

> The reader brings expectations derived from a literary and life experience to bear on the text, and the text feeds back these expectations or it does not. The reader filters this feedback through characteristic defenses, imbues them with fantasies, and transforms the event into an experience of moral, intellectual, social, and aesthetic coherence. (Appleyard, 1990, pp. 10, 11)

Appleyard finds it problematic that the reader in all of these literary theories exists as "a shadowy entity" (p. 7). He is interested in the question of why readers respond in different ways to reading as they mature and develop. Appleyard relies on a developmental theory of reading and posits five roles that readers experience from before the time that they read as children through to adulthood: reader as player, readers as hero and heroine, reader as thinker, reader as interpreter, and the pragmatic reader. He states that these roles are really no more than "shorthand labels for a cluster of distinctive responses, a set of attitudes and intentions readers bring to reading and of uses they make of it, which appear to shift as readers mature" (p. 14).

Appleyard would probably not agree with Rabinowitz's construct of the reader as the authorial audience because it seems to limit the role of the actual reader, especially when the reader is still fairly young or youthful. The concept of authorial audience would not assist him in understanding why readers respond differently while they mature. Perhaps this is due to the above noted passive quality that seems to inhere in the idea of reader as "audience." Appleyard's literary theory is of a social psychological nature. For him the meaning of a text lies heavily in the developmental nature of the reader, and less in the nature of the text itself. And so, at different ages, children read differently. Appleyard's theory is at odds with Rabinowitz's contention that "conventions" and the "authorial audience" work together to create meaning because young people may not even have internalized the various conventions that Rabinowitz identifies. Indeed childhood can be defined in terms of the preconventional and provisional-conventional stages that children live through. Appleyard finds both Piaget's stages of development and Freud's psychoanalytic theory useful for establishing the roles that readers experience, but he favors Erik Erikson's view of child development because it considers the social and cultural contexts in addition to the psychological stages of identity formation. Although each of Appleyard's stages is age specific and acts as a foundation for subsequent stages of development (which is reminiscent of the intellectual stages of Piaget, i.e., the movement from concrete operations to formal operations), Appleyard is not a developmental biologist as was Piaget whose work paralleled the development of brain growth. Erikson and Appleyard view adolescence as a stage marked by social interactions, search for identity, and struggle with moral issues.

LIke Rabinowitz, Appleyard argues that there is no explicit concept of making meaning through writing. But since age is a crucial factor in considering how children make meaning in their reading, it follows that age would also affect how children write about their reading experiences. For example, an adolescent would have the cognitive capacity to reflect on the underlying thematic meaning of a story while a six-year-old child would still be limited cognitively. For example, Appleyard draws on the research of Winner (1988) to support the idea of the later development of metaphorical language in children. Young people's thought is primarily tied to concrete images, says Winner (1988, p. 28). Unlike the adolescent who can think metaphorically, the younger reader-writer will rely on a concrete, literal association.

What ideas from Appleyard's work may provide insights into the ways in which adolescent readers explore and form their identities? Appleyard devotes an entire chapter in his book, *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* to the adolescent reader and identity. The focus of the chapter is on the idea that the adolescent approaches reading as a thinker. The focus is quite psychological and is supported with Erikson's construct of adolescence as the stage where typically an identity crisis ensues. Since adolescence is a volatile period for many young people, books become attractive that feature young adult characters struggling for autonomy, working through problematic relationships, experimenting with alternative life styles, and so on. Appleyard agrees with Erikson that the adolescent is searching for an "inner self" in many conflicting possibilities that present themselves. He points to three reasons why adolescents read young adult fiction of the above-mentioned type: (1) the experience of involvement which includes identification with characters and their situations, (2) realism or believability of the story itself, and (3) the ability of the story to raise questions involving thinking.

Of course, many young people do not choose to read books that feature adolescents in problematic situations. I believe that adolescent boys especially tend to be less flexible and they tend to choose science fiction and fantasy books exclusively. In their book *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys (2002),* Michael Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm suggest that young men make book choices based on social networks. Books are vehicles for conversations with friends. I have seen this happen in my own classrooms.

For example, the recent resurgence of interest in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series (due to the cinematic production of *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers*) resulted in more frequent exchanges of penbook letters between boys in my Reading Room classes. Letters about the actions of characters, battles, and comparisons of the Tolkien text and movie were popular subjects. These letters became like ordinary conversations with friends. For example, in this letter Cody writes to his friend Evan about J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers*.

> *At last! My great desire that has been plaguing me ever since the day I began reading the book The Fellowship of the Ring has been satisfied (okay, maybe only half satisfied). I have finally completed reading The Two Towers. Although I have found the title most misleading, this book has been extremely well written and completely captures my attention for weeks on end! The reason as to why I find the name "The Two Towers" misleading is because it hardly mentions "Light Tower" (or whatever it is called). At present, it seems quite clear that the "Dark Tower" is Minal Ithil (I'm talking about the nine Lords' home). Yet, what is the "Light Tower"? It has hardly been mentioned at all! Is it Minas Tirith because of the fact that this city is virtually the most powerful force against the assault of the Dark Lord's army? Or is it some other abandoned, unreachable tower within Mordor? If you ever find out, please inform me of it. Even though I have found this title another puzzle to add to my growing collection of mysteries though, the plot of the story has been intensely fascinating. Between The*

> *Wheel of Time series written by Robert Jordan and The Lord of the Rings series, I can almost say that J.R.R. Tolkien is just a notch better than Robert Jordan. On the other hand, Robert Jordan is a much more powerful worker with the topic of magic. If you would like to know why, I must admit that I am not quite positive yet. At the present moment, I greatly believe that this is due to the fact that Robert Jordan actually tells the reader about how the magic users will invoke magic by combining certain proportions of fire, water, wind, and earth. Although he does not go into great depths as to how magic is used, it is still enough to interest me. It is a true pity that the main character of The Two Towers was not Gandalf. Now that would truly be a great influence to motivate people to read this story.*
>
> *As I read the last few chapters of this glorious book, I begin to think of how disastrous our world would be without hope and faith. Like the stock market, the daily situations that occur in our lives will always vary. Sometimes, a certain person's life can become so miserable that life is no longer worth living. Yet, this doesn't mean that death will become the only possible solution! As long as the person keeps on living through his life with hope in his or her heart, there will be a change in the outcome of the events. Just like Frodo and Sam! Despite the immense strength of the Dark Lord, Frodo was still able to find some method to give the Dark Lord the slip. Sometimes, I believe that as long as a person lives through life with determination, there will not be any point in life where suicide is 'the only option.'*

Cody gives evidence of a strong sense of his audience. The tone is casual as he asks questions of his friend Evan and asks for help about understanding the Light Tower. Through reflecting on Frodo and Sam's predicament, he connects with (and becomes aware of) his own (emergent) beliefs and shares some of his personal values. Evan responds to this letter even though he has not read *The Two Towers*. He is able to make a connection with his own sense of faith and hope that marks the beginning of an exchange of ideas.

> *In response to your letter I am sorry to say that I have never read Tolkien or Jordan. I was a little lost in what you were saying, so I can't respond to the statements about the Light Tower and the other plot questions, although your prediction about the world without faith and hope brings to mind some important issues. Without hope you have nothing to look forward to and without faith you have nothing to believe in—two important characteristics that make life worth living. Perhaps this is what Tolkien was hinting at in the book.*

In this response Evan acknowledges that he appreciates what his friend is reading by relating to the prediction about the world without faith and hope. In turn, he shares his personal view that in a small but important way contributes to the closeness of the friendship. It is interesting to note here that a fantasy novel like *The Two Towers* can trigger thoughts and raise questions about real life situations in the minds of the adolescent reader.

Appleyard suggests that "as adolescents we discover that meaning is an issue, that the things we read cannot simply be taken for granted as pictures of the world, that they offer us points of view and ways of feeling that ultimately have to be evaluated" (Appleyard, 1990, p. 119). He warns that too much attention to textual conventions such as literary devices, symbols, ambiguities and so on and not enough focus on the experiential involvement with the text may interfere with the meaning and significance that adolescents construct from the narrative. While reading Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*, Nellie, a grade nine student, discovers a perspective about poetry that confirms her own personal belief about the analysis of poems:

> *One of my favorite passages in this novel is one about the purposes of poetry. Allie and Noah are sitting outside on the front porch and Noah is reading poetry by Whitman, Thomas, Tennyson, and Browning to Allie. "She rested her head against the back of the rocker, closing her eyes, growing just a bit warmer by the time he finished. It wasn't just the poems or his voice that did it. It was all of it, the whole greater than the sum of the*

> *parts. She didn't try to break it down, didn't want to, because it wasn't meant to be listened to in that way. Poetry, she thought wasn't written to be analyzed; it was meant to inspire without reason, to touch without understanding." (Sparks, 2002, p. 46)*
>
> *I love this passage because I think it's a whole new way of looking at literature. Perhaps authors aren't writing with the intention of having their work dissected. Maybe, the figures of speech that we find in literature aren't meant to be ironic or symbolic; maybe the author had a different reason for incorporating phrases and comparisons and we, as readers, are merely misunderstanding the real purpose of his or her work.*

Through reflecting on the meaning of this passage, Nellie has constructed ideas that extend her personal view of poetry, rather than blindly accepting the virtue of the kind of poetic analysis that occurs in many classrooms.

Nussbaum's Poetic Justice

An author who has explored extensively the existential significance of the reading experience of which Appleyard speaks is the philosopher, Nussbaum.

Martha Nussbaum is not a scholar who uses philosophy to develop literary theory; she is a philosopher who uses literary theory (and extends literary theory) in order to do philosophy, especially moral philosophy and ethics. She mixes aspects of literary theory and fictional reading with philosophical concepts. Nussbaum's philosophical notion of reading is based on the Aristotelian idea that learning occurs through experience. She is interested in the experience of narrative by the "imagined reader" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 4). Her image of the reader is perhaps somewhat similar to Rabinowitz's construct of the authorial audience. The imagined reader is an implicit reader, not an actual reader. The implicit reader shares the same intentions as the characters in the narrative.

Nussbaum aims to examine the sort of feeling and imagining that is enacted "in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative, the sense of life that animates the text as a whole" (p. 4). The texts that are examined are novels, because Nussbaum is interested in the vicarious nature of reading, the ability of the actual reader to empathize with the characters within the novel. She explores how the literary imagination of the reader allows him or her to experience what it is like to embody the lives of the characters residing within the covers of the book's narrative. "Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves," says Nussbaum (p. 5). For her the novel is a "living" form. Unlike narrative forms like the essay, the novel possesses a textual power to reproduce experience, values, and emotions. Her philosophical theorizing dwells in the question of the reading experience and thus turns into a hermeneutics of the reading experience, sustained by a hermeneutic perspective. What is important for Nussbaum's hermeneutic is the shared communication between the author, text, and the reader. For educators, what is of pedagogical interest in Nussbaum's work is the question of the nature of the experience the student may have with language in reading and writing.

Important pedagogical questions may be seen to arise from Nussbaum's philosophical writings: What is the reading experience like for the student who reads a powerful story that evokes feelings and imaginings? More specifically, "How can the student's writing about this reading experience be seen as a source for clues regarding the tacit nature of personal knowledge? In this context it is of lesser concern if the student can order story events, recall details correctly, draw conclusions, or make character inferences. What is important is how the student enters the shared space of the text wherein author and reader dwell.

A theoretical orientation like Nussbaum's that serves to explore these questions must be able to address the significance of the tacit dimension of language. This tacit dimension is not necessarily accessible to conceptual or textual analysis. Being aware of the tacit dimension of language would prevent the problem of reading-writing as meaning-making to be formulated as the attempt of making language crystal clear and arranging it as if it were an object. Instead, hermeneutic interpretation, in Nussbaum's sense, helps to excavate what is buried in everyday, pre-reflective experience. The student's reading and writing experience needs to be explored in such a way as to show the "structure" of the lived experience in a light that gets at the deeper meaning of this experience.

Michael Halliday (1975) also has addressed the theme of the pre-reflective experience of reading when he distinguishes between two functions of reading: the pragmatic and the mathetic. Part of the mathetic is devoted to what he terms the "imaginative function" of language. It is the means whereby we create possible worlds and go beyond what Bruner calls, "the immediately referential" (Bruner, 1986, p. 125). Perhaps these worlds of possibility tie into pre-reflective experience and could be explored through student writing. Nussbaum's notion of reading lends itself to a pedagogy that fosters personal exploration of story through writing; it could provide for what Bruner terms "imaginative transformation" (p. 127).

There exist similarities between Nussbaum's idea of imaginative reading and Louise Rosenblatt's notion of aesthetic evocation. Rosenblatt is considered to be one of the forerunners of reader-response criticism; she defines reading as "a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 268). Rosenblatt focuses on reading aesthetically rather than reading efferently. In efferent reading, the reader focuses on the pragmatic task of acquiring information; there is no lived through experience. In aesthetic reading, the reader approaches the text with a particular stance (what Rosenblatt calls selective attention): "Reading, especially aesthetic reading, extends the scope of that environment and feeds the growth of the individual, who can then bring a richer self to further transactions with life and literature" (pp. 273, 274).

Rosenblatt's aesthetic evocation and Nussbaum's idea of the literary imagination have implications for the ways in which adolescents explore identity through the novels that they read. The adolescent may try on different roles through the reading experience. This kind of vicarious experiencing is what would entice Appleyard's adolescents as thinkers to select books that enact stories that contain problems that they struggle with in their own lives. Situations that a student would be unlikely to encounter can be experienced through story. Such literary experiences may be catalytic in assisting the student to confront ideas or problems that he or she would normally suppress or not be aware of. For example, a student reading a novel such as *Go Ask Alice* (Anonymous, 1971) may wonder about what it is like to take drugs, to become addicted, to overdose, and to eventually die. How susceptible would such student be to the power of cocaine?

In the following penbook letter Robert, a grade nine student, writes about *The Amber Spyglass* (Pullman, 2000). He has seemingly embodied the life of Lyra and her relationship with her daemon. In turn, Robert begins to wonder what he would do and how he would change if he faced the ultimate challenge of sacrifice. He begins his letter with a quote from the novel:

> *… so the daemon held himself quiet so as not to distress the human who was abandoning him, and now they were both pretending that it wouldn't hurt, it wouldn't be long before they were together again, it was all for the best. But Will knew that the little girl was tearing her heart out of her breast. (Pullman, 2000, pp. 253, 254)*

Robert then responds to this passage from the book by clarifying its meaning and explaining its poignancy.

> *This passage is told through Will's eyes, a close friend of the girl in the passage, whose name is Lyra. In this book, in Lyra's world, the daemon is one's heart and soul that takes the shape of an animal. Lyra's daemon, Pantalainon, does not have a fixed form, and can change shape since she is not old enough for it to be in a fixed form. Lyra and Will, in this passage, are traveling to the land of the dead, but the gatekeeper will not let her bring Pantalainon in. Lyra wants to talk to her dear friend Roger and save the dead from oppression, but she is forced to abandon her heart at the gate, to try to save those who are supposedly beyond help. This is what moves me in this passage. Lyra, in making the ultimate sacrifice against*

> *herself, saves the rest. And this form of being a martyr is far worse than dying for a cause. It is living for the cause. Lyra is forced to live, without love, tenderness, and happiness--every good emotion in life--and is left with pain, sorrow, despair, and anguish. This is illustrated perfectly in the passage: "suffering with Pan because of Pan" (p. 253). This passage helps to illustrate Lyra's pain at losing her soul for a time, not knowing if she will ever find it again. As you can see, this passage touches on many levels of humanity, making the reader reflect not just on himself, but on all human beings of the earth. What would change if I did this? How would I feel? And, the most important—would I still be me?*

From a pedagogical perspective these questions are certainly deep and complex for a fourteen year old to be pondering. They are witness to the power of the literary experience to elicit personal reflection about the question of identity formation in adolescents. The student's experience with *The Amber Spyglass* has resulted in his questioning existentially whether he could be a martyr and if so whether his Self would stay intact.

Rosenblatt's notion of aesthetic reading (what the reader has lived through in his or her transaction with the story) is of particular interest in examining student written reflections. She suggests that "every aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 277). When the student is reading a story, he or she assumes a stance and his or her attention shifts inward so that feelings and emotions are aroused. Rosenblatt suggests that it is the selective attention of the reader (or stance) to what is aroused in consciousness that interacts with the text in aesthetic reading. By focusing on the aesthetic, the student's reading could elicit more insightful reflections about his or her identity.

Nussbaum (1994) suggests that literature may act like a form of therapy. The reader seems to be subjected to therapy such as psychoanalysis where a psychiatrist may use hypnosis to help the client relive a scaring time in childhood so that healing may begin.

> *Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation. (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 6)*

I offer an excerpt from a penbook letter as an example of this therapeutic aspect of reading and writing about reading. For Jeanne, reading a novel called *Insatiable: The Compelling Story of Four Teens, Food, and its Power* (Eliot, 2001*)* that focuses on anorexia nervosa seems to function in a therapeutic manner to a degree as can be seen in this letter.

> *For me personally this book is not full of surprises because I know all the tricks in the book. Each separate person reminds me of someone in my life at the hospital. I guess it's weird because in my mind thoughts seem to be so normal I don't even wonder why I think of them. The unnatural, crazy thoughts of the characters are a part of everyday life for me. Some people may say that this is a sign of relapse but as written in another book on eating disorders the voices stay forever.*
>
> *The two characters in this book with whom I identify most with are Samantha and Hannah. Sam, as her friends call her, is anorexic but also a cutter. This means that she cuts herself to ease the pain. This stage of illness became a part of me while I was in recovery. A quote from the book, "The pain is out of me now she said to herself and I'm alive. The pain is out of me and I'm going to be alright" conveys the feelings I went through during this stage. I still cut occasionally and I hate to write it but it helps. I can relate with Sam; I feel what she is going through. Hannah is bulimic, a disease I don't know if I'll ever get over. Although she binges and purges for different reasons than me, it has the same underlying intentions.*

It is significant that Jeanne recognizes that the story characters' thoughts are abnormal, and yet remain normal for her. Through writing her reflection, she also admits that writing about cutting is helpful and eases the pain that could be seen as therapeutic writing.

From the perspective of Nussbaum and Appleyard certain kinds of stories, such as young adult coming of age novels, would have the power to affect the adolescent's emerging sense of self, although other genres such as fantasy and science fiction may also contain the possibility of transformation. At first thought, the idea of fantasy and science fiction may trigger associations of illusions, falseness, and charlatanism. Common sense might suggest that there exists a marked contradiction between the idea of fantasy and convincible reality. For example, William James (1950) has shown under what conditions experiences are believed to be true and real. Impressions gain a sense of reality, he says, when the manner in which they establish themselves in consciousness excites and stimulates us.

The kinds of experiences that literature may offer the adolescent are not restricted to ones that focus on the reader's identification with characters and problematic situations to confront his or her own struggles. Readers may also acquire cathartic emotions of, for example, a deep sense of community or fellowship. The process of gaining a fundamental community experience or tragedy experience was referred to by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (1998) as uplifting spiritual catharsis. Catharsis is the deep and edifying experience with which a Greek tragedy used to finish and which was meant to convert excess emotions into virtuous dispositions.

Through literature the student may experience emotionally an increasing capacity for such great humanizing values as brotherhood, community, fellowship, and love. These kinds of experiences are most difficult to reduce to a verbal explanation. In many penbook letters students describe how they encounter an uplifting experience of this kind and struggle making sense of the experience and certainly "putting it into words."

For example, in this letter a grade eight student Serena is inspired to write a poem about her relationship with her best friend while reading *Silent to the Bone* (Konigsburg, 2000*)* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (Bradbury, 1962*).*

> *The beginnings of this poem first popped into my head while reading Silent to the Bone and it basically completed itself as I read Something Wicked This Way Comes. It is a poem about friendship. I thought that in both books there is a more peculiar, unique, very different person, who has a more normal best friend. The more normal one never questions that the other is very special, and he tries not to let it bug him. Also, the more different ones of the pairs get into deep trouble in both books, and the more normal ones rescue them. It's sort of like Will and Connor are "guardians" of Jim and Bran, who are the 'chosen ones.' Even though Will and Connor are perhaps not as special as their best friends, they still play important roles. The poem is written from the point of view of the "guardian," and it's very, very personal since it describes some of my own feelings towards my best friend. He's very reckless, and I sometimes feel like I'm around just to make sure he doesn't go too far.*
>
> *Dear Friend*
>
> *There is a light inside you*
> *Burning without a fuse*
> *An everlasting energy*
> *That you will never lose*
>
> *When confronted with your demons*
> *You never run or hide*
> *Instead you fight to your last breath*
> *For you have too much pride*
> *To admit your wrongdoings*

Your fear of life and love
You wreak complete and total havoc
To those who watch you from above

I am but your guide
A simple encouraging force
I shall stay by your side
Until your life has run its course
A course that's full of promise
For you have much to do
I will be there 'til the end
Because I live for you"

It is interesting but not surprising that Serena chose to write a poem to best express her inner feelings about her friend, but it is also interesting to note that the reading of two novels was the catalyst for the writing of the poem itself.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the conceptions of reading and writing in literary theory in Rabinowitz's *Before Reading*, Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader*, and Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*. I further examined the consequences of these conceptions for the processes of the construction of meaning, epistolatory writing and the experiences of identity formation and development.

Rabinowitz's authorial audience focuses on the centrality of the reader's experience in the construction of meaning and the reader's recognition of the author's intentions. The reader applies a set of literary conventions to make sense of the text. Although Rabinowitz does not explicitly refer to writing, I suggest that the actual writer who is reflectively writing about his or her reading may write from the point of view of the authorial audience; however, as the writer makes personal or critical connections, he or she may choose not to write in the socially constructed manner of the authorial intention. Questions about how the identity of the adolescent is affected emerged as Rabinowitz's ideas of authorial audience and corrupted reader were examined. An example of a penbook student letter demonstrated that Rabinowitz's rules of meaning have diagnostic possibilities as starting points for assessing how students are reading.

Next, Appleyard relies on literary theory that is closest to the idea of interaction. The reader interacts with the text in a feedback loop to make meaning; the interactions are affected by the reader's developmental level and change as he or she matures. Like Rabinowitz, Appleyard does not directly refer to constructing meaning of a text through writing. Because Appleyard's work is dependent upon age and cognitive capacity, the emergence of literal and metaphorical thinking becomes significant. Identity formation is discussed in the form of one of the five roles that Appleyard selects that readers experience from pre-school to adulthood. In adolescence the reader is labeled "thinker" and most likely undergoes an identity crisis, so novels featuring autonomy and relationship issues are characteristic of this time.

Last, Nussbaum philosophizes about the literary imagination and is concerned with the capacity of the reader to embody the lives of the characters in the text. There is a shared relationship among the author, the novel, and the reader.
Nussbaum also does not discuss the construction of meaning through writing about the text, but she does emphasize the power of the literary experience to evoke feelings and thoughts which is also reminiscent of Rosenblatt's aesthetic reading. The literary imagination does have implications for identity development in adolescents especially as they struggle to define and redefine themselves through empathizing with challenges and problems of the characters that they encounter. From a pedagogical point of view, my concern is that students read stories and novels that in some way or another are felt to be consequential rather than irrelevant, profound rather than trivial, and thus oriented to growth, to knowledge, to maturity. As teachers we frequently seem to act intuitively in the sense of what seems to be "good" or "appropriate" for a student without, however, reflecting more deeply on the nature of the experiences into which we coax, or deliberately or inadvertently guide the student (van Manen, 1991). If the pedagogical meaning of

education implies that we help or guide the child into a "world," then reading and writing-about-reading, as an intimate relationship with language, is such a world.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES

To guide my students into this world about writing about reading I have selected and applied four formal interpretive perspectives with the purpose of providing me the teacher and researcher with understandings that could be translated into thoughtful teacher responses to the penbook letters: discourse analysis, (auto)biography, hermeneutics, and postcolonial/critical theory. Of course, a teacher also needs to read student letters pedagogically. In knowing a particular student, a teacher understands some of what is important for this student to read in the response she receives from her teacher. Certainly, the teacher can always find something positive to write to recognize the student--whether that recognition takes the form of noting insights, good description or summary, or even an improvement in elaboration of ideas in the letter. But the response can provide much more than this. Once a teacher becomes familiar with qualitative research approaches, it may also be very helpful to ascertain which research approach may yield understandings that enable the teacher to respond in an even more thoughtful manner.

I have chosen these particular perspectives because they seem most current and relevant to the task at hand. Each subsumes an array of subsidiary orientations that may or may not be informative in the teacher's attempt to provide a possible interpretation and response to a student letter. It speaks for itself that the appropriateness of any perspective will depend on the nature of the student writing.

Discourse Analysis: Inquiring into Understanding Writing about Reading

Discourse analysis as inquiry

It may be argued that the rhetorical origins of discourse analysis go back to the writings of Aristotle and Cicero. Aristotle's art of rhetoric is still studied as a relevant source for rules of persuasive discourse; and Cicero is known for his powerful orations, eloquent letters, and dazzling rhetoric. But the methodology of modern discourse analysis has more formalist qualities and is related to the program of functional text analysis in Russian and Prague scholars such as Roman Jacobson (1971) and Mikhail Bahktin (1953). It finds an impetus in the structuralist work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), who showed that meaning lies more between words than in the words themselves. And it is influenced by the language philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958).

The broad French tradition of discourse analysis tends to be identified with the fields of linguistics, semiotics, and ideology critique. Authors such as Bakhtin (1953) focused especially on the systemic social, institutional and political contexts of discursive patterns and structures. Similarly, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) examined the relations between the formation of (ideological) discourses and the institutional practices that reflect or are constitutive of these relations. In this approach discourse analysis becomes a form of ideology critique (Bourdieu,1977; Bernstein,1971). In the semiotic work of Roland Barthes (1987) there is a strong reading of cultural practices in the use of discursive signifiers. For example, he applied his semiotic analysis to photographs, fashion and other aspects of culture such as in *Empire of the Sign* (1982) and *The Fashion System* (1983). His work inspired, in part, the French feminist semiotics of inter-textuality of Julia Kristeva (1980) and Helen Cixous (1994).

Especially influential in the French tradition are Michel Foucault's studies of the ways in which discursive formations, by means of which people communicate with each other, create relations of institutionalized power and knowledge. Foucault shows that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (1977, p. 27). More recently the work of Umberto Eco (1983) is also seen as exemplifying discourse analytic methods. In North America discourse analysis was influenced by the above French, German, and Italian streams as well as by the British ordinary language philosophy (Searle, 1983), speech act analysis (Austin,1962), talk of teachers and students in secondary classrooms (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), and language studies by Halliday and Hassan (1989).

There are now so many forms of discourse analysis that it is probably best seen as a cross-disciplinary interest in studying the structures of texts in order to see how meaning is constructed. In education, discourse analysis is being used as a special form of narrative and conversational analysis (Bruner,1986). And it is used in ethno-methodological studies of the "seen-but-unnoticed" practices in the language of the classroom and student evaluation (Mehan, 1979), to study symbols and meanings in mathematics (Pimm, 1995), and to explore discourses of literacy education and subject matter teaching (Lemke, 1990).

Discourse analysis as method

Variations of discourse analysis theory are found in cross-disciplinary fields and across disciplines. It is not a clear or simplistic matter to know how to use critical discourse as a method. Norman Fairclough states that, "Discourse is a difficult concept, largely because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints" (1992, p. 3). So, it is not surprising that the different programs that drive these theoretic interests are associated with a variety of analytic methods. Some examine systemic structures of textual works in their entirety (macro-focus), some do close readings of word patterns, rules, conventions, and semantic shifts (micro-focus), and others investigate larger chunks of texts and patterns among and between texts (medium focus).

In terms of my interest in student writing one could look at this phenomenon in a societal or generational manner. For example, one could study student penbook letters within the context of changing peer culture, or with a view of growing up in an age of electronic media. One could ask, how does the technologizing of professional discourses have consequences for institutional relations and power structures? Or, how has e-mail and chat-room discourse altered the way young people communicate and express their interests, attitudes, and feelings? It is apparent that new forms of writing and innovative code systems have evolved among computer users and travelers of cyberspace.

At the level of a much closer (word level) reading, one could study student writing in terms of grammatical functions, linguistic behaviors, and idiosyncratic expressions of words and language usages. Here the method of discourse analysis uncovers how things are done; it may involve close readings of student writings to reveal hedging behavior, deixis, ergativity, implicature, modal verbs, directive utterances, and so forth.

At the medium level of discourse focus, one can examine student texts at the level of epistolary and penbook writing. This method also allows the notice of features at the larger and smaller scale of analysis. So I engage discourse analysis primarily at this medium focus.

Discourse analysis as an approach to study student writing about reading

I examine literary data (student penbook letters) through discourse analysis to determine how students are making sense of a specific novel through their own writing and communicating this writing to their teacher (or in this case me) as well as to other students and their parents. I rely on Michael Halliday's theory of language "which sees language as multifunctional, and texts as simultaneously representing reality, enacting social relations, and establishing identities" (1992, pp. 8, 9). There is also the feature of inter-textuality to be considered in this study because students' construction of texts is in response to reading a literary text. My specific interest is to examine the relation between student written discourse of the fictional text *The Outsiders* and students' real lives. All reading could be seen as the reading of the self. Discourse analysis may be helpful in exposing the social and individual identities of the students who read about the fictional lives of characters in their novel.

I selected twenty student letters (a manageable number), all of which are responses to the reading of *The Outsiders*, a popular young adult novel by Susan Hinton (1967). This coming of age novel focuses on the experiences and relationships of young gang members and their attempts to survive on the street with another opposing gang. Violence, friendship, and moral dilemmas are common features of the novel.

One reason that *The Outsiders* is such a popular book with adolescents may be that students are able to identify with characters in the text. *In Schooling the Violent Imagination* John Schostak "suggests that a central concern for adolescents is the struggle to find an identity for the self in the context of a series of identities given to the individual by society at large: teachers, schools, parents, families, peer groups, social workers, and the like" (1988, p. 34). Even Susan Hinton recalls in writing *The Outsiders*: "There were no books that showed what was really going on with teenagers. I wrote *The Outsiders* because I wanted to read it" (Atwell, 1998, p. 520).

Novels that engage students emotionally and convincingly are popular novels. The characters in *The Outsiders* (Ponyboy, Johnny, Sodapop, Dally, Darry) behave in ways that are understandable to contemporary students' experiences of how people behave and what they are like. "Reader response theory has shown us that the reader needs to share a knowledge of the world, a cultural repertoire with the text in order to take that text on board" (Sarland, 1991, p. 94).

Reading *The Outsiders* has resonance for students. It is a book about adolescent culture which is characterized by its need for independence and its quest for identity apart from parents yet within and outside of the peer group. *The Outsiders* represents the experiences and feelings of what it is like to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy both in school and society at large.

For example, in this passage from the book, the protagonist, Ponyboy, reflects on the Greaser's gang sense of identity, which in turn is how he sees himself.

> I thought of Sylvia and Evie and Sandy and Two-bit's many blondes. They were the only kind of girls that would look at us, I thought. Tough, loud girls who wore too much makeup and giggled and swore too much. ... lots of times I wondered what other girls were like. The girls who were bright-eyed and had their dresses a decent length and acted as if they'd like to spit on us if given a chance. Some were afraid of us, and remembering Dallas Winston, I didn't blame them. But most looked at us like we were dirt—gave us the same kind of look that the Socs did when they came by in their Mustangs and Corvairs and yelled "Grease!" at us. (Hinton, 1967, p. 23)

This book finds a wide and sympathetic student audience, though its protagonists are "problem" youth who are often in trouble. Many adolescents recognize the pressures of "fitting in" and know and understand the culture of "winners and losers." It is not surprising then that students, regardless of social class background, identify with the Greaser gang, the underdogs, the group who is treated with disdain by others in society. A text like Th*e Outsiders* offers a site of cultural typification. As students read *The Outsiders*, they may "peel back the carpet of cultural discretion to reveal what has been brushed beneath it" (Sarland, 1991, p. 73). In this way the student may come face to face with the other and in turn reveal an understanding about him or herself.

Susan Hinton uses language that students recognize as being "the language of adolescence" which is remarkable considering the book was written over forty years ago. For example, girls are referred to as "broads," meeting girls is to "hunt some action" (p. 22), a fight is a "rumble," a knife is a "blade," hurting is "cracking some rib," etc. Although these words and phrases are regarded as passé by present-day students, these same students have no difficulty understanding what the words mean.

After reading twenty student letters carefully, I selected ten letters based on the following criteria derived from discourse analysis: They contain reference to story events (summarizing) and/or personal opinions about the meaning of the story; a sense of audience (teacher or other student); and references to relationships with self and/or others. The letters are examined from three perspectives: (1) signs of reflectivity and addressiveness, (2) signs of communicative practice, and (3) signs of self-referentiality. I assigned numbers to the letters randomly.

1. Signs of reflectivity and addressiveness

First, I examined the letters in terms of the kinds of reflection that students perform, as well as the ways that students give discursive account of the addressive nature of their reading experience, how and in what way they feel the text speaks to them.

1a Summarizing

When students are asked to write about a novel, they usually respond with plot summarizing. This form of reflection often involves discussing the elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement, and resolution. However, what do students actually do when they summarize? Although each of the ten students relates uniquely to the story in their letters, I have identified three ways of distinguishing how plot is reflected: plot summarizing, plot commentary, and plot criticism. I have considered the use of summary regardless of whether the student is writing about the book after reading a few chapters or after completing the reading of the entire novel. Letters 8 and 9 are the only letters that are written before the students have finished reading the book. Letters 1, 4 and 8 contain plot summaries. These students have reviewed the major events of the story. Letters 2, 5, 6, 9, and 10 are commentaries. In other words, story events are referred to while the student is expressing opinions about characters' behavior and language or presenting a defense of a possible theme of the book. Letters 3 and 7 are plot criticisms. Although explicit reference to story events may be limited, students discuss critical stances that are gleaned by reading experience of Th*e Outsiders*.

To understand what events stand out for students as they read this book, it is useful to examine letters that contain both plot summarizing and commentary. What is explicated or what do students point to? All of these letters contain references to the rival gangs, the Greasers and the Socs. Other events that are cited are Johnny's death, the near drowning of Ponyboy, Johnny's killing of the Soc, and the burning church. It is interesting to note that all ten letters refer explicitly or implicitly to violence and death in the story, including the two letters that contain plot criticism. For example, in letter 3 the student writes that the Greasers "worry about where they are going to sleep, eat, and if they are going to die from a rumble tomorrow." It seems then that plot summaries in student writings shift their emphasis toward the heights of scenes portraying critical moments that are emotionally charged.

1b. Addressive reflection

As noted above, students sometimes quote selected sentences and paragraphs from the novels they read. They do this when the phrase or passage is striking or powerful. The passages often address (speak to) them in a way they seem to find difficult to describe.

In letter 7 the student selects for discussion a quotation that describes the murder of Dally:

> *I chose this quote from The Outsiders. "He was jerked half around by the impact of the bullets then slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face."*

Letters 2, 7, and 9 also include single-sentence quotations from the novel. For example, in letter 2 the student praises the book and inserts a quotation:

> *It was an incredible book. The way Susan Hinton describes "Greasers" or slum kids helped me realize how they look at life and the way they are always there for each other. Although the "rich kids" or Socs are different,*

> *each group has its similarities. As it said in the book, "We each see sunrises and their beauty, even if it is from a different place."*

The student seems to feel touched ("an incredible book") by the fact that, in spite of the huge differences in the way that the gangs look at life; nevertheless, there is something profoundly "similar." But the word "similar" that the student uses, falls far short of expressing the way the student seems to feel addressed by the description. So she quotes from the book this line, "We each see sunrises and their beauty, even if it is from a different place."

What makes this line quotable? On the one hand it almost seems somewhat cliché-like in its reference to the sun and beauty. But Susan Hinton does not just refer to the proverbial "beautiful sunset." She restates the cliché and makes it fresh and original. And now the evocation of "similarity" acquires a certain depth and elusiveness in this metaphoric trope. The statement says more than the simple informational content. We might say that the meaning of the words overflows their ordinary semantic content. And the student feels addressed by realization that all people share a fundamental humanity and deserve the same respect, even though they have stark differences. It is a way of saying that people are the same despite their social class standing. Gazing at a sunrise becomes a trope for evoking a strongly felt meaning about the basic humanity of people. There seems to be more going on here for this student than just commenting on a story event. The student feels addressed. She has had a kind of epiphany and realizes that loyalty and friendship are valued by both upper and lower classes.

In letter 9, the student qualifies the feelings he has for friends as opposed to strangers.

> *Here is a quote from The Outsiders. "Dally had seen people killed on the streets of New York, so why did he look so sick now?"*

Why would the student select this particular quotation? He says,

> *This refers to Johnny's beating. I feel that in this quote the author is trying to explain that when you're friends with someone and you care about them emotions rise. So when Dally's friend Johnny gets beaten up, he feels sick to his stomach because he knows and cares about Johnny. Unlike in New York where he sees just another person whom he didn't know or care about get killed, he feels for the deceased a little bit, but not as much as when his friend Johnny died.*

The violent beating of a fictional character prompts the student to reflect on his own friends and what it is like to care. "Emotions rise"—the pain of seeing a friend hurt makes one very aware of what it means to have a friend, to be close to another. This student seems to be making sense of the times that he responds emotionally in his life. This is an example of exploring one's self-identity unintentionally through writing about a fictional character's experience.

1c. Intensification of words and reflective meaning

Another way of discerning meaning is through the application of the idea of intensification. Intensification occurs when key words carry more weight than they normally would. This happens when the author writes in a manner that is especially vivid or poetic and that evokes images that become available for reflection. The intensification of language resembles the thickening and compressing effect of poetry. This "thickening" is, of course, the thickening of meaning that we experience in the contingent, often unpredictable moment of happening on the right words or the right combination of words in the attempt to say something just right. If we were to alter such poetic text by paraphrasing or summarizing, then we would most likely experience some loss of meaning.

For example, the writing that occurs after the following student encounters the key words, "grim triumph," may be seen as a result of the image that the student conjures in his mind.

> *I chose this quote from* The Outsiders*. "He was jerked half around by the impact of the bullets then slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face."*

In his letter 7 the student explains why he selected this quotation from the book.

> *I chose this quote because it makes me realize that someone who has as many problems as Dally would just leave them with someone else to deal with. Instead of solving all of his own problems, he pushes them aside which leads to more and more problems.*
>
> *In the quote, it says that "he slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face." I think Dally has this "look of triumph" because he knows he has finally beaten the cops. He has almost gotten away with the crime he committed, but at the last minute he makes everything worse for himself. He points an unloaded gun at the cops, which forces them to fire at him. Dally commits suicide by pointing that gun at the cops. I think that he wants it all to end this way.*
>
> *Dally knows he had helped his friends to the point that he couldn't help anymore. His best friend Johnny is dead, and I think that he tries to blame it on himself. Dally knows that when he is dead, he won't have to worry about anything anymore, but what I don't think he knows is that he is making everything worse for all of his friends. He leaves all of his problems for them to deal with, let alone the fact that he is gone.*

What is interesting is the phrase "he slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face." It expresses much more for the student than its mere content. In a way the phrase merely states that Dally fell down and had a certain look on his face. But for the student the phrase speaks of much more. It makes him realize a whole array of complex and subtle feelings about the significance of Dally's shooting.

The oxymoron, "grim triumph," is an example of intensification because it deictically points the student to look beyond the triumph of Dally's immediate avoidance of imprisonment (by intentionally pointing his unloaded gun which ensures that he will die) to the reality of the grimness that remains. The student recognizes the stark reality of the aftermath of suicide for those who are left behind to mourn and contend with the complications.

The author, Susan Hinton, has intensified the complexity and subtlety of meaning (of the whole phrase and especially of the words grim and triumph) through the poetic device of intensifying their felt meaning. In the quoted sentence there is a certain poetic effects that these words "grim" + "triumph" have on each other when placed side-by-side and thus become commingled in a fertile combination. We can test the intensification of such words when we try to replace them with other words that might seem synonymous: the term "grim" could be replaced with dour, dismal, gloomy. And the term "triumph" could be substituted with coup, victory, feat, or achievement. But none of these words and word combinations seems to carry the poetic fortuitousness of "grim triumph."

2. Communicative practices

How do students communicate with each other? with their teacher? Students may write penbook letters that are friendly, serious, witty, sarcastic, etc. depending on the genre of the book, their personal mood, and the audience for whom the letter is intended. From a discourse analysis point of view, students direct their readers to perform certain actions, to adopt favored perspectives, and to take evaluative positions. I discuss two aspects of communicative practices: 1) the phatic function of language, and 2) directive utterances.

2a. Phatic function of language

The letters are written to me, the teacher, to another student, and sometimes to a parent. In what ways are the communicative devices of the letters to the teacher different from the letters to students? Letters 3, 5, and 8 are written from one student to another. An idea that may be relevant here is Jakobson's phatic function of language (see Eco, 1983, p. 164). Phatic language is the kind of language that helps us to maintain contact with one another. It is the kind of language that is seen often in schools when students meet at their lockers, pass notes when they should be listening to their teacher, or talk to each other when the teacher is teaching. Umberto Eco argues that "phatic speech is indispensable precisely because it keeps the possibility of communication in working order, for the purpose of other and more substantial communication" (1983, p. 164). In writing to each other, students reinforce their friendship relationships. The student letters to each other invite response. Two of the letters direct the readers to read *The Outsiders* ("I would suggest that you read it." "I highly recommend reading it.") while letter 3 acknowledges that the reader has already read it by joking ("because you like guys with long hair (lower standards").

Students also use language informally to support the friendly nature of exchange with each other in these letters. For example, "Slampers, gotta jet, chill, takes the kick for his friends, a looker, 1-888-HOT-STUFF, and stuck-ups" are such expressions. The way in which the letter is signed demonstrates the connection that the writer and reader have with one another. Closings such as "Peace out g-Dogg!!!," " Luv always," and "Truly" are more friendly and fun than "Sincerely" or the signature of the student in the letters written to the teacher.

2b. Directive utterances

By using phatic speech students are at the same time using directive utterances in their letters. Ken Hyland defines a directive utterance as "one expressing an obligation on the reader either to do or not to do something" (2002, p. 216). He discusses three kinds of directive utterances that may be identified in surface structure of language: (1) imperative, (2) modal of obligation, and (3) predicate adjective expressing importance/necessity (p. 216). All three forms of directive utterance appear in the student letters. "Suggest" and "recommend" are imperative directives which advise a course of action, namely reading the book. The use of first person pronouns here also contributes to a communicative sense of personal involvement between the writers and their readers. For example, in letter 3, the student asks her reader to "Let me know what you think." She requests that her friend reply with a response.

Students are situated socially whether they are writing letters to their friends, teacher, or parents. In letter 5, the writer uses a number of modal verbs (*would* always feel needed/wanted, one's identity *would* be picked by someone else, I *would* say yes, I *would* have to say, he *would* become more real). The use of modals conveys a feeling to the reader of the writer's "logical necessity" (p. 21) to think in a certain way. The modal kind of directive results in the reader being affected cognitively to understand the point that the writer is trying to make.

The third directive, the predicate adjective, expresses the writer's judgment about a particular stance. The reader is invited to take an evaluative position. Letter 6 contains many of these directives because the student is intent on defending her position of not "judging a book by its cover." The following utterances sometimes combine personal pronouns with this kind of directive:

> *This is understandable; this is not true; Ponyboy, at this point, makes a very interesting statement; I find this statement so interesting because it is true; I am proud of Ponyboy; This really made me respect Randy because it's true; I am really proud of Randy; I think this is a great book to read; I think this is an important message.*

Through using directives, this student is trying to persuade her teacher to see the novel is the same way. She points to quoted passages from *The Outsiders* in her letter to urge the teacher to make the connection between the quote and her argument.

3. Signs of self-referentiality

In what ways do students in their letters use self-referential language? (such as I, we, my, our, self.) Students write self-referentially when they take the perspective, not of commentator or critique of the text they read, but of the engaged or subjective self. I have defined three possibilities: 1) the self through identification, 2) a self realization, and 3) a transformative sense of self. This sense of self can refer to the personal and private self or to the social and public self.

3a. The self through identification.

As the student writes about his or her reading of the novel or story, several forms of identifying with the characters may be noticed in their text.

The following excerpts from letter 5 show how the student, in identifying with Dally, a fictional character, invokes her relationship with and attitude towards her older brother and sister.

> *Although Ponyboy is an excellent character, I would have to say Dally and Sodapop are my favorite characters. Dally pretends that he doesn't care, but it is obvious that he loves his fellow gang members. I guess I like him because that is what my brother is like. He's wild but always takes the "kick" for his friends. I really respect that in anyone.*

In the sentence, "He's wild but always takes the "kick" for his friend," the student is now writing about her brother who supports his friends even in times of trouble. In the second letter excerpt, the student recognizes the influence of siblings on her own behavior.

> *Ponyboy's older brothers are also part of the Greasers, and I'm sure that was the biggest influence on his joining the gang. I know I look up to my brother and sister, and if asked to go out with them to a party or even just to "chill" I would say yes.*

When the student writes, "I know I look up to my brother and sister, and if asked to go out with them to a party or even just to 'chill' I would say yes," she is again locating herself with her siblings along side Ponyboy and his brothers to make sense of a character's actions and her sense of self.

3b. Self-realization

In writing about the message or theme that the author is trying to convey, students often discuss their own self-realizations. For example, in letter 3, the student explains why *The Outsiders* is a good book to read.

> *It is a really good book because it shows people like us who have a high standard of living what it is like to be poor. Because we are so close to living in a Utopian society, we really don't know how bad life can be. We worry about what movie we are going to see next weekend, and they worry about where they are going to sleep, eat, and if they are going to die from a rumble tomorrow.*

She then expresses her disgust that "we" (the social self) are preoccupied with superficial concerns when people are trying to survive in severe economic constraints.

> *It makes me angry to know that we worry about the stupidest things in the world when we really don't have a reason to.*

This comment shows that the student through reflecting on what it means to be poor has experienced a realization of her own. Another student in letter 2 experiences a similar realization. He understands that there will continue to be intolerance in the world because society doesn't recognize that we are one human family.

> *Through this book Hinton tries to tell us that all humans feel and respond the same—each feels the guilt of killing, the sorrow of death, or the joy of achievement. But, until society realizes this, someone will always be cast out—an outsider.*

The student's realization is what she thinks Hinton intends for "us" (the social self) to understand in reading the book: unconditional acceptance of others.

3c. A transformative sense of self

Occasionally, students will respond to the novel that they are reading by addressing a social injustice and making recommendations for change in society. In letter 6 the student uses the social self ("we") and points to the necessity for change and improvement.

> *I think this is a great book to read because it gets its message (Don't judge a book by its cover.) across so clearly. I think this is an important message because in our society we are so quick to judge people by rumors we hear and by their appearance. We don't take the time to get to know people and find out who they are before we decide if the person is someone we can get along with. I think that is why we have so many loners in our society. We judge too quickly. This book has an important message for society that we should take to heart.*

The student's reading experience of *The Outsiders* is transformative for her as we see in the last sentence: "This book has an important message for society that we should take to heart." The student reflects on a common, but prejudicial human action of making judgments about other people through first impressions of appearance or rumor, and she recommends that "we" respond to this problem in a serious manner. Over many years students have written penbook letters that contain ideas that relate to how they see themselves and each other. By creating space in curriculum for a program like Reading Room students have the opportunity to grow to love good books through meaningful transformative experiences. Good books have the power to unsettle us and raise doubts about what we thought was indubitable. Certain books may dispel stereotypes. Maxine Green writes that developing a sense of social justice involves an awareness of social agency. Through dialoguing about their reading experiences with others, students may "invent a project of remediation, palliation, repair" (in Ayers, et al., 1995). Literature provides the context for students to become conscious of their world-view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and the system of social relations.

Conclusion

I have explored how discourse analysis enables the teacher to determine how students make sense of a young adult novel *The Outsiders* and in turn their own lives through writing penbook letters. Through analyzing 10 penbook letters from three perspectives: signs of reflectivity and addressiveness; signs of communicative practice; and signs of self-referentiality, I was able to expose students' social and individual identities. Through analysis of letters containing plot summarizing, plot commentary, and plot criticism students pointed to story events that were charged emotionally and addressed them personally. Intensification or examining words and phrases that carry more weight than they normally would was another way to examine how students constructed meaning. Students communicated with each other and their teacher to direct their readers to perform specific actions such as reading a particular book, initiating or maintaining a relationship, assuming favored perspectives and particular critical stances. Last, student penbook letters were examined for their use of self-referential language that took the forms of the self through identification with characters in the story, self realization or personal ephiphanies, and a transformative sense of self when the student actually addressed a social injustice and recommended a change in society.

(Auto)biography and Narrativity

(Auto)biography seems to be a research approach that is central, not only as a prominent narrative form of inquiry into the self, but also as an almost inevitable dimension of the very practice of teaching. Teachers are challenged to understand the life stories (biographies) of their students as the pedagogical context for all teaching-learning situations and relations. As well, the notion of curriculum as vitae conjures (auto)biography as a mode of understanding children's lives, experiences, growth and identity development.

In examining autobiography, I focus on this mode of inquiry as a theory, a method, and as a possible approach to the study of writing as a transformative process.

Next, I briefly engage this mode of inquiry with student penbook letters. So, with reference to these texts, I explore autobiography for the purpose of discovering how it may assist me in my research to make sense of the pedagogical dimensions and implications of understanding the phenomenon of writing while reading among junior high students.

(Auto)biography as inquiry

In dealing with understanding of self and life, biographical and autobiographical approaches can be broadly understood as disciplinary theories: in the discipline of sociology there are the symbolic interactionist theories that study life and the social self (Novak, 1978; Douglas, 1988; Denzin 1989; van Maanen, 1988); in ethnography one finds explorations of the cultural self (Childress, 2000; Fine, 1987); psychology offers life histories of the psychological self (Kotre, 1984); in literary fields one may study the personal and private self in the form of (auto)biographies (Keats, 1952; Orwell, 1986). Further, in philosophy one finds studies of the existential self such as in Sartre's study of Jean Genet (1952), in Derrida's reflections on the philosophical lives of his departed friends and philosophical colleagues (2001), and Ricoeur's study of Freud in the field of philosophy (1970). It appears that (auto)biographical trends also move across disciplines in terms of the recently emerging interests in narrativity.

Historically, one could argue that (auto)biography has been an interpretive approach to the understanding of self and life (Butt, 1995), dating back perhaps to the beginnings of writing, certainly well before even the *Confessions* from the 5th century by St. Augustine (1989), or the *Confessions* from around 1770 by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1954), or the famous 1791 study of *The Life of Samuel Johnson* by James Boswell (1979). These works have all been considered as markers of the onset of the autobiographical impulse in history, the humanities, and the human sciences. From a contemporary perspective, a renewed interest in (auto)biography has emerged in feminist theory (Walker, 1983; Miller, 1988; Blackman,1998), queer theory (Howey, 2002), and education (Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Abbs, 1974, Butt, 1989).

So, realizing that there are many possible theoretical perspectives that can guide (auto)biographical inquiry, for the purpose of this chapter I need to make a selective choice. I am especially interested in the way that (auto)biographical inquiry allows me to address the notion of "self," "uniqueness," or the "who" of the student. In particular Derrida has made some observations that are especially intriguing in this respect (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001). Derrida confesses that for him,

> *the great question is always the question of who. Call it biographical, autobiographical or existential, the form of the question who is what matters to me. (2001, p. 41)*

He adds that this question of the who is also the most difficult question because of "the irreducibility of the *who* to *what*" (2001, p. 41). Derrida's reference to the biographical "who" strikes me as most significant for educators. The who is the reference to the uniqueness of a person and it is this uniqueness, irreplaceability, and irreducibility that Derrida proclaims is at the centre of much of his work.

(Auto)biographical inquiry as method

In general, autobiographical method "involves the studied use and collection of personal-life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individual's lives" (Denzin, 1989, p. 13). What is important is the recorded life experiences of a person.

Some of these questions guide my inquiry and analysis:

1. What is the image-of-self that would describe the student's reflective letter about the literary text?
2. How does this story speak of the writer's identity? Being and becoming?
3. What story does the author seem to be living out from the perspective of the text?
4. How does the text seem to speak to the "who" rather than the "what" of the person?

In the field of curriculum, autobiography is often used to study students' subjective lives and learning experiences. Since the process of autobiography is reminiscence, reflection on life-story, and personal interpretation, it may tell the reader where the writer is, has been, or might go, and who the writer is, was, and may want to become. The writer produces the text, and in doing so produces him or herself. In other words, autobiographic writing is a kind of self-making. To write is to measure the depth of things, as well as to arrive at a sense of one's own depth. Autobiography also can make intelligible, indirectly, what may be hard to describe directly.

(Auto)biographical inquiry as a possible approach to the study of penbook student-writing about reading

The first question that needs to be posed is, "why would one want to use (auto)biographical method to interpret a student penbook letter about reading a piece of literature?" The response, of course, would be, the letter needs interpretation because the teacher wants to respond to it. And so one must ask, what would be an appropriate way of understanding (reading and interpreting) the letter? From a pedagogical viewpoint, one appropriate response would be to ask, how can this letter be seen to raise the question of the student's self, uniqueness, who this person is?

One could ask what is it about his or her life that the student has raised and that the teacher can be sensitive to?

I would suggest that one may see the literary text that the student is reading as a mirror, and that one may consider the letter that the student writes about the book as what the student sees when he or she looks into this mirror. So, in terms of method (a way of approaching the student's letter) one can ask, "how is the letter an expression of what the student sees (reads) in the book?"

There are certain questions that may be helpful in interpreting a penbook letter (auto)biographically. From an (auto)biographical point of view the teacher who reads (interprets) the student's writing about his or her reading constantly must mediate the content of the letter with what the teacher knows about the student and what the teacher knows about the book. Sometimes the teacher has not read the book and so needs to infer what the book offers or question the student more about the story.

The reading of literature has a prominent place in my language arts classroom. I believe that the study of literature has relevance for students. It is through the reading, reflecting, and writing (in a reader response program such as Reading Room) that students often discover and develop understandings of themselves and others. Through writing about experiences encountered in literature, a student may inadvertently uncover an aspect of the deep, inner self. As reader of these written reflections, I engage in the act of interpreting or making sense of the student's own interpreted experience of reading. "Understanding is an intersubjective, emotional process," says Norman Denzin (1989, p. 28). Since the student penbook letters are really texts about other texts, they resemble autobiograpies to the extent that they become personal experience narratives. The novel is the catalyst for the student to retrieve a personal experience story.

Engaging (auto)biographical inquiry with student texts

I begin with Tina's letter written in response to *Stargirl* (Spinelli, 2000) not only because it is interesting in itself in terms of the voice of the student, but also because Tina's letter reveals the kind of research approach that best fits its underlying purpose. The letter is reproduced verbatim as she wrote it in her penbook.

> *I just finished reading one of my new most favorite books. Stargirl is the story of a girl who has a pet rat named Cinnamon, who dances in the rain, who wears outrageous clothes, who sings "Happy Birthday" while strumming a ukulele to total strangers, who is writing the bibliography of Peter Sinkowitz, and who does so many other unpredictable things.*
> *But I found what really made me love this book is the moral of the story. It is a common moral told to many youth. I think this book showed the importance of being you rather than telling it. When I look back on the*

events of the story, it makes me sad about myself. I let myself be defeated sometimes when I think something is dumb, cruel, or unnecessary. In the past I have gone along with it. I realize now that I am older I have gotten better at being myself in some ways and weaker in others. I have always put my hand up in class ever since I can remember. But as some of my friends who used to be great intellectual students have fallen into my category of losers, it makes me sad. Girls and guys who have very wonderful unique ways of thinking now never do homework or participate in class, and have gotten involved in drugs and other bad stuff. I think this is a book that every young person should read. I feel though that it should be private, not read as a novel study or a class project. I think it's hard for young people to admit that the way they act is not really the way they are. To admit that they have been jerks in the past is hard; it's hard as a person to see your own flaws, especially when we make fun of others.

The book centers around Stargirl and is told through the eyes of Leo, a student at Mica High. Leo is a nice guy. He follows the crowd, a typical teenager. He's also Stargirl's boyfriend. From the moment that he lays eyes on her, he's head over heels in love. He does everything that he can to try to prevent her from being on the hotseat, the school talk show that makes students squirm which he runs along with his best friend, Kevin. Eventually Leo gives in and Stargirl is put on the hotseat, and it is a total disaster. Hilary Kimble, the most popular girl in school, despises Stargirl. She is on the jury, and the jury is only supposed to ask questions. But Hilary gets up and gives it to Stargirl. "I got a simple question for you. What's the matter with you? Huh? Huh?"

And suddenly Stargirl goes from being very popular to having no friends at all. Leo then becomes a target of their dislike. But unlike Stargirl who doesn't seem to notice, Leo does. He feels the others piercing evil glances and snickers. Then he finally snaps and blows up at Stargirl. Because of her love for Leo Stargirl becomes Susan, the average Mica student. But her unhappiness and the fact that Leo can't take being an outsider is too much and they break up. Leo doesn't go to the dance, but Stargirl does.

> *She shows up in a beautiful buttercup dress and once again regains the approval of her peers. Then she disappears, never to be seen again. And Leo is left with an empty hole in his heart. It's almost as though his wound needs a star shaped stopper to stop the hurt, but the only person who has one is gone.*
>
> *What is important about this story is that it's like real life and Stargirl doesn't return. "She did it for you." " What?" "Gave up her self, for a while there. She loved you that much. What an incredibly lucky kid you were."*

Now, I will reread the letter and annotate, in an interpretive manner, in the column beside the letter, what seem to be (auto)biographical themes.

Student letter (Tina)	(auto)biographical interpretation
I just finished reading one of my new most favorite books. Stargirl is the story of a girl who has a pet rat named Cinnamon, who dances in the rain, who wears outrageous clothes, who sings Happy Birthday while strumming a ukulele to total strangers, who is writing the biography of Peter Sinkowitz, and who does so many other unpredictable things.	Notice how Tina immediately tries to portray the uniqueness of the character Stargirl. Stargirl likes to write and describe the unique "biography" of her hero. Thus we see identification of self at various levels here. Tina identifies with Stargirl, who identifies with her hero.
But I found what really made me love this book is the moral of the story. It is a common moral told to many youth. I think this book showed the importance of being you rather than telling it. When I look back on the events of the story, it makes me sad about myself. I let myself be defeated sometimes when I think something is dumb, cruel, or	The book reminds the student about the importance of "being" who you are—a unique self. Interestingly, in this part of her letter Tina repeatedly uses the terms "self" and "I." It shows her (adolescent) preoccupation with trying to express her own experience of self, the ego, or

unnecessary. In the past I have gone along with it. I realize now that I am older I have gotten better at being myself in some ways and weaker in others. I have always put my hand up in class ever since I can remember. But as some of my friends who used to be great intellectual students have fallen into my category of losers, it makes me sad. Girls and guys who have very wonderful unique ways of thinking now never do homework or participate in class, and have gotten involved in drugs and other bad stuff. I think this is a book that every young person should read. I feel though that it should be private, not read as a novel study or a class project. I think it's hard for young people to admit that the way they act is not really the way they are. To admit that they have been jerks in the past is hard; it's hard as a person to see your own flaws, especially when we make fun of others. *The book centers around Stargirl and is told through the eyes of Leo, a student at Mica High. Leo is a nice guy. He follows the crowd, a typical teenager. He's also Stargirl's boyfriend. From the moment that he lays eyes on her, he's head over heels in love. He does everything that he can to try to prevent her from being in the hotseat, the school*	the I. Putting up one's hand in class is also a way of drawing attention to the self. The student is saying, "Look at me," and "I can be me in front of others." In this section, Tina focuses on the "selves" of her friends. She sees their "unique ways." Tina recommends the book to other young people, as if it were a mirror in which each reader can find his or her own real self, how they "really are." Tina realizes that it is difficult to recognize or divulge the parts of the self that are flawed. She admits to covering up her own flawed self by making fun of imperfections in others.

talk show that makes students squirm which he runs along with his best friend, Kevin. Eventually Leo gives in and Stargirl is put on the hotseat, and it is a total disaster. Hilary Kimble, the most popular girl in school, despises Stargirl. She is on the jury, and the jury is only supposed to ask questions. But Hilary gets up gives it to Stargirl. "I got a simple question for you. What's the matter with you? Huh? Huh?" *And suddenly Stargirl goes from being very popular to having no friends at all. Leo then becomes a target of their dislike. But unlike Stargirl who doesn't seem to notice, Leo does. He feels the others piercing evil glances and snickers. Then he finally snaps and blows up at Stargirl. Because of her love for Leo, Stargirl becomes Susan, the average Mica student. But her unhappiness and the fact that Leo can't take being an outsider is too much and they break up. Leo doesn't go to the dance, but Stargirl does. She shows up in a beautiful buttercup dress and once again regains the approval of her peers. Then she disappears, never to be seen again. And Leo is left with an empty hole in his heart. It's almost as though his wound needs a star shaped stopper to stop the hurt, but the only person who has one is gone.*	Notice how Tina identifies strongly with the humiliation that Stargirl experiences. Hilary asks Stargirl a seemingly suggestive question that aims right at the centre of the self where one is most vulnerable: one's own sense of identity. *"I got a simple question for you. What's the matter with you? Huh? Huh?"* How can this question be answered? At the core of the self there is no definitive unit of identity. Identity is "who" we are and the "who" defies objectification. Tine realizes how much one's sense of self is dependent upon the recognition and affirmation we receive from others. It is significant that the sections of the book that Tina discusses deal with the changing self in relation to others. This must be important for her own sense of self. Tina experiences the story as mirroring real life. She points out what

What is important about this story is that it's like real life and Stargirl doesn't return. "She did it for you." "What?" "Gave up her self, for a while there. She loved you that much. What an incredibly lucky kid you were."	is important in the story by quoting an evocative passage from the end of the book showing that we can destroy the people who sacrifice for us and these may be the people who care about us the most.

When I read student penbook letters about stories through an autobiographic lens, I look for the personal and the unique. Stories tend to invite a reflective search for significance and they also have the power to transform: we may be touched, stirred, and moved by a story.

Autobiographical inquiry provides insights about the self or "who" of Tina. And what is especially revealing, I believe, is that Tina's reading of the book is itself an orientation to the (auto)biographical. The entire letter demonstrates that Tina's writing is an attempt to address the significance of self, uniqueness, and identity that she explores. What is Tina's understanding of her self? The answer is less important than that Tina constructs her reading as space for writing about the self.

As a result of my analysis of the letter I see that understanding herself is important to Tina. She writes about being happy and sad about different aspects of her self. Through identification with the fictional Stargirl, the self that Tina aspires to is strong and stands up to criticism and ridicule by her peers. Tina's "self-identity" is a work in progress. As others change, it is not easy to resist changing with them. It is important for Tina not to surrender her interpretation of self to the whims of others; but the cost of doing so can be painful, and friends may be lost along the way. So, as a teacher with these insights, how may I respond to Tina responsibly and pedagogically?

Since I have read *Stargirl*, I first share with Tina how much I enjoyed reading her letter. Next, I tell Tina that I loved reading the novel also especially because of the protagonist, Stargirl. In doing this, I indirectly show Tina how much I appreciate her. I suggest that Tina indeed recommend this book to her friends to read; I also tell her that I will inform other students about it. I ask her whether I should do a book talk about the novel so that more students may read it. In asking for her advice, I let Tina know that I value her good judgment. I also write how much her participation is key to interesting discussions in class and to continue to "raise her hand" and raise issues and questions.

Much of what I learn in Tina's letter I store away. My growing understanding of Tina as a unique person becomes a resource in my interactions with her individually and in group contexts. Tina has alerted me to the centrality of tact and sensitivity in my relationships with all of my students. The self is fragile and vulnerable. When a student invites her teacher to glimpse an aspect of her inner world, the teacher must treasure and protect this space.

In this section of the chapter I examined autobiographical inquiry as theory, method and as another approach to the study of penbook letters. In applying autobiography to the student writings, the pedagogical dimensions of the development of the child's identity emerged. As Tina's penbook letter was interpreted, four questions were applied and assisted me in making sense of the writer's identity and in turn, provided answers for the appropriate way to respond to Tina's letter.

Hermeneutics

Interpretation theory or hermeneutics is a fundamental philosophical human science approach to the study of pedagogical phenomena. I am aware that this is a multifaceted field, but I will try to make some distinctions that provide me with cursory understandings of some of the interpretive dimensions that are potentially helpful for my interest in understanding writing and my work of interpreting and reflecting on student penbook letters about reading literary texts.

In examining hermeneutics, I focus on this mode of inquiry as a theory, a method, and as a possible approach to the study of writing as a transformative process. Next, I briefly engage this inquiry with a student text. So, with reference to this text, I intend to explore hermeneutics for the purpose of discovering how it may assist me in my research to make sense of the pedagogical dimensions and implications of understanding the phenomenon of writing while reading.

Hermeneutics as inquiry

Historically, hermeneutics was employed as a method to interpret Biblical scriptures. Gradually, it evolved into a way of interpreting other texts. By the end of the 19th century, hermeneutics was used to interpret aspects of human behavior and cultural life.

There are several philosophers, many of whom are German, who are considered the main proponents in the history of the hermeneutic movement. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1977) used the notion of "hermeneutic circle" to refer to the principle that a part of a text always is understood in terms of the whole and the whole is understood in terms of its parts. Understanding of a text surfaces in the interpretive process and adjustments between the parts and the whole. Generally Schleiermacher is credited with being the first philosopher to seriously reflect on hermeneutics as a method to interpret a text. In his view it was the task of hermeneutics to grasp the animating genius (the creative spirit) that produced a text. Hermeneutics "attempts to creatively suggest possible meanings and interpretations and shows relations between things in new ways" (D.G. Smith, 2006). Because the spirit that produced the text is essentially creative, the interpreter should rely on the same kind of creativity to interpret it.

Schleiermacher's successor, Wilhelm Dilthey (1987), was greatly influenced by Schleiermacher's ideas. For him hermeneutics expanded not just to include the understanding of the author's animating genius, but also the historical context for this genius or spirit that gives shape to cultural expressions, art, and human works. Dilthey introduced the idea of the involvement of empathy and *verstehen* (understanding). In contrast to the natural sciences that seek explanations for phenomena, human science seeks *verstehende* understanding—we must project ourselves into the cultural and historical life of the other.

Martin Heidegger (1962) called hermeneutics the phenomenology of human understanding. He stressed the importance of the location of human beings (*Dasein*) in their world. Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics took a turn away from epistemological (knowledge) questions to ontological questions of the Being (meaning or nature) of beings. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975, 1976), a student of Heidegger's, continued with a more philosophical hermeneutics.

For Gadamer, textual meaning resided not only in the author or the world, but also in the tradition, the landscape and its horizons within which the text is created and finds expression and meaning. He used the term "fusion of horizons" to explain when there is dialogue between traditions of past and present that in turn result in forms of self-understanding. For example, Gadamer showed how our prejudices (often understood as biases) should be considered as pre-understandings that are embodied in our language, art, and institutions. Pre-understandings are necessary since they allow us to interpret texts in the first place. Gadamer is often quoted as saying that "a text is best read as a response to a question" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 64). There is not even a statement that cannot be seen somehow as an answer to a question.

Gadamer's ideas had a great influence on literary reader-response theory as well as on related literary hermeneutic writings of Wolfgang Iser (1978), Paul Ricoeur (1981), and Stanley Fish (1980). Hermeneutics as reader-response theory asks how the reader as a unique person interprets the text. This type of hermeneutics leads more closely to constructivist inquiry.

Under the influence of French structuralism (semiotics) and post-structuralism (deconstructionism), hermeneutics became a more radical interpretive theory. The semiotic hermeneutics of Roland Barthes (1975), Julia Kristeva (1980), and Umberto Eco (1994) was less concerned with such things as author's intention and historical tradition, and more with the signifying nature of the text itself. Their discourse analytic approaches looked for cultural signifiers and social practices in textual interpretation. The genealogical works of Michel Foucault too studied the discursive practices in texts; he examined how these practices reflect, for example, institutional relations of power and identity in the history of discourses (1980, 1995).

Probably, the most radical approach to hermeneutic theory is represented by the deconstructionist writing of Jacques Derrida (1978) and the postmodern narrative hermeneutics of Francois Lyotard (1986) and Richard Rorty (1982). Deconstructionist and postmodern authors stress the contingent, fragmentary, intertextual, self-contradictory, and playful nature of all textual reading, writing, and interpretation.

Hermeneutics as method

Hermeneutics is often referred to as the theory or method of interpretation; initially primarily the interpretation of texts. But it is now commonly accepted that many human phenomena can be approached as if they are "texts." In a way, depending on one's attitude, anything can be seen as interpretable. Central ideas in hermeneutics are textuality, understanding and interpretation.

The question of method continues to be widely discussed by philosophers and other hermeneutic scholars. Gadamer suggested that there is no place for method in philosophical hermeneutics if "method" is used as a term of inquiry in the positivistic sense or in the natural sciences. However, that does not mean that hermeneutic inquiry is merely arbitrary or that the title of Gadamer's book *Truth and Method* is entirely ironic. The term method derives from *methodos*, literally meaning "a going after," and "way, path, manner" (Klein, 1971, p. 462). While "method" as a term of hermeneutics and the human sciences is not reducible to positivistic procedures, techniques, and rules, it does not follow that hermeneutic method therefore must be unruly. Gary Madison (1988) offered an argument that shows that neither positivistic method nor no-method are acceptable positions to take in interpretive inquiry. He contrasted the extremes of formalistic hermeneutic method with no-method and suggests that, generally, hermeneutics is characterized by method in a normative sense.

According to Madison, an example of formal hermeneutic method is the work of E.D. Hirsch who argued that there must be exact and agreed upon procedures and rules for interpreting texts for fear that the interpretive process becomes chaotic and arbitrary. In his book *The Validity of Interpretation*, Hirsch (1967) demanded that hermeneutic method should aspire to scientific validity in the sense of the social sciences. It was his view that validity in interpretation must match the author's intentions, and it is the task of hermeneutics to recover and make intelligible this underlying authorial intentionality in a manner that is objective and systematic.

First it should be noted that various other hermeneutic perspectives have different foci (than authorial intention) for exploring or determining the possible meanings of a text. And, it seems reasonable to presume, that it would not be appropriate for hermeneutic inquiry to accept just any kind of interpretation (however whimsical or playful) as valid. Second, the problem with Hirsch's position is that it robs hermeneutic thinking of the creative and intuitive dimension; in his scientific framework, new interpretive insights and original understandings would seem to become unlikely or even impossible.

So, in trying to steer between method as scientific technique and method as no-method, Madison believed that an acceptable hermeneutical approach must provide for criteria, but does not have to be positivistic (1988, p. 26). He compared method in an abstract and formal sense with method in a normative sense. Method is abstract and formal when it functions as an intellectual, rational technique that is learned without regard for original insight and subjective judgment. Method is normative when it validates its interpretation through persuasive reasoning, involving "good" and "responsible" judgments.

Madison listed and described a series of methodological norms that may guide the interpretive activity in the study of a text (Madison, 1988, pp. 29-30):

1. Coherence – The interpretation must be free of contradictions and present a unified picture.
2. Comprehensiveness – The text that is being interpreted must take into account the author's body of work as a whole.
3. Penetration – A "guiding or underlying intention" must be brought out in the interpretation.
4. Thoroughness – All questions that relate to the text (or are asked of the text in terms of understanding it) must be considered.
5. Appropriateness – The questions should be the original questions that the author of the text has asked.
6. Contextuality – The subject matter must be read in both its historical and cultural context.
7. Agreement (1) – The interpretation must be in agreement with what the author actually says or claims.
8. Agreement (2) – The interpretation should be in agreement with the author's traditional and "accredited" interpretations; although Madison says that there is flexibility here because often good interpretations are those that "break" with traditional interpretations of the author.
9. Suggestiveness – Because of the originality of the interpretations, they will stimulate further research.
10. Potential – The question here is whether the interpretation may be extended and whether the results "unfold themselves harmoniously."

By articulating these norms, Madison claimed that he had pointed to some acceptable ways that interpretation was performed.

So, how do I use hermeneutics as Madison's methodological norms to interpret penbook letters? Both teacher (TP) and student perspectives (SP) will be noted as the letter is examined.

Engaging with the student text

Jan's letter is reproduced verbatim as she wrote it in her penbook. The letter starts with a quote from the book she discusses, *The Night is for Hunting* (Marsden, 1994*)*.

> *"If peace ever comes back I'm making a vow: I'll design myself special glasses. They'll block out whether people are fat or thin or beautiful or weird-looking, whether they have pimples or birthmarks or different colored skin. They'll do everything suffering's done for us, but without the pain."*
>
> *This quote speaks to me very strongly because it shows what the important characteristics of people truly are. Although this is a very long quote, each word fits together perfectly with another and as a whole it flows very well together, very succinctly. This passage of text appears near the end of the book when the main character, Ellie, is viewing her life from afar, being very introspective and contemplating what aspects of life are actually important. She has just escaped from captivity by the enemy, and is wishing that the war would end. I think that by going through so much pain and misery, she is at the point in her life where she can see past appearances. This is clearly a big step in Ellie's personal development. What is kind of ironic and sad about this quote is that only by experiencing war could she have this epiphany. At the beginning of this series, there was no mention of Ellie's thinking about the important virtues of a person. In fact, she was just an average girl, commenting on things like cute boys and ugly teachers and the like.*
>
> *The questions that came to my mind after I read this quote are, would Ellie have come to the eventual conclusion that appearances truly don't matter if she hadn't been involved in a war? Does it take great suffering and tragedy to realize what's truly important? A possible reason that civilization hasn't realized this is because we haven't suffered enough; our lives are too comfortable. You usually don't know what's important until it's too late.*

After I read this quote, I stopped and wondered what kind of world we would live in, if everyone had these glasses. Surely a much kinder, more caring and less prejudiced one. Society is so based on appearance that sometimes the truly important aspects of a person are ignored. I predict that if we all owned these glasses, people's values would change, and existing hierarchy would crumble. The world would be a more tolerant place to live in.

I think that this quote is simply a more elaborate and intricate way of saying the cliché, "True beauty resides within," I have obviously heard this saying before but it wasn't until I read this passage that I realized that with a certain person, you may be only seeing a fraction of his or her character from the outside, and if you don't look past the surface features or reputation surrounding him or her, you may never know his or her true personality. Stereotypes are usually very hard to break, and first impressions are very influential. I think that I finally understand this because the imagery used in the quote is very real and genuine. This quote is actually kind of disconcerting, in a way. Why do people have to be taught how to look past appearances? Shouldn't this be naturally the first thing someone sees in another?

Ellie's words are interesting because in the list of things that these "special glasses" would see past was the word beautiful. I'm glad that Marsden put that word in the quote because if he didn't, it would appear that only ugly or disfigured people are the types of people who need their looks to be ignored and seen past.

Finally, I felt hopeful when I read this quote as well, because it shows that there are people in the world who can look past the superficial and materialistic ways of life and realize what virtues should be valued. I aspire to be this kind of person.

Again, I reread the letter and annotate, in an interpretive manner, in the column beside the letter, what seems to be a student perspective (SP) and a teacher perspective (TP).

The student text	Interpretative Inquiry
[The student's letter starts with a quotation from the book she discusses.] "If peace ever comes back I'm making a vow: I'll design myself special glasses. They'll block out whether people are fat or thin or beautiful or weird-looking, whether they have pimples or birthmarks or different colored skin. They'll do everything suffering's done for us, but without the pain." *This quote speaks to me very strongly because it shows what the important characteristics of people truly are. Although this is a very long quote, each word fits together perfectly with another and as a whole it flows very well together, very succinctly. This passage of text appears near the end of the book when the main character, Ellie, is viewing her life from afar, being very introspective and contemplating what aspects of life are actually important. She has just escaped from captivity by the enemy, and is wishing that the war would end. I think that by going through so much pain and misery, she is at the point in her life where she can see past appearances. This is clearly a big step in*	(SP) Jan has selected this passage from the novel because she is interested in understanding what people are like beneath the surface. (TP) Jan has identified a metaphor (special glasses). Will she get beyond the literal interpretation? (TP) Through reflecting on the quote Jan is experiencing what the character Ellie is doing in becoming introspective about her war torn life. She strongly identifies with the fictional character.

Ellie's personal development. What is kind of ironic and sad about this quote is that only by experiencing war could she have this epiphany. At the beginning of this series, there was no mention of Ellie's thinking about the important virtues of a person. In fact, she was just an average girl, commenting on things like cute boys and ugly teachers and the like. The questions that came to my mind after I read this quote are would Ellie have come to the eventual conclusion that appearances truly don't matter if she hadn't been involved in a war? Does it take great suffering and tragedy to realize what's truly important? A possible reason that civilization hasn't realized this is because we haven't suffered enough; our lives are too comfortable. You usually don't know what's important until it's too late. *After I read this quote, I stopped and wondered what kind of world we would live in, if everyone had these glasses. Surely a much kinder, more caring and less prejudiced one. Society is so based on appearance that sometimes the truly important aspects of a person are ignored. I predict that if we all owned these glasses, people's values would change, and existing hierarchy would*	(SP) In identifying with Ellie's pain, Jan wonders whether life's miseries offer insight into what people are really like beneath the surface. Jan thinks that Ellie's perspective is a sign of maturity. (TP) Jan seems to have internalized the concept of epiphany that was reviewed in class last week. (SP) Jan feels the irony between the painful experience of war and personal growth. (TP) Jan can apply the concept of irony involved to story events. Notice how Jan thinks that regular students are unreflective and are occupied just with everyday adolescent happenings. (SP) Jan thinks that a person can change from being superficial to reflective. (TP) Here, Jan engages in dialogue with herself and answers her own questions. Writing enables Jan to make sense of her questions. (SP) She posits that life is too comfortable and people don't make important realizations in time. (SP) Here, Jan thinks about how caring and tolerant a society could be if we all wore the glasses.

crumble. The world would be a more tolerant place to live in.	(TP) Unfortunately, Jan's real world is far from ideal in terms of prejudice.
I think that this quote is simply a more elaborate and intricate way of saying the cliché, "True beauty resides within," I have obviously heard this saying before but it wasn't until I read this passage that I realized that with a certain person, you may be only seeing a fraction of his or her character from the outside, and if you don't look past the	(SP) Jan's own reflections cause her to connect with a saying on beauty. She now feels that she understands the meaning behind the saying.
surface features or reputation surrounding him or her, you may never know his or her true personality. Stereotypes are usually very hard to break, and first impressions are very	(TP) Jan is able to connect her ideas to an idiom.
influential. I think that I finally understand this because the imagery used in the quote is very real and genuine. This quote is actually kind of disconcerting, in a way. Why do people have to be taught how to look past appearances? Shouldn't this be naturally the first thing someone sees in another?	(TP) It is important for Jan to look beyond appearance to understand the "real" person.
Ellie's words are interesting because in the list of things that these "special glasses" would see past was the word beautiful. I'm glad that Marsden put that word in the quote because if he didn't, it would appear that only ugly or disfigured	(SP) Jan is frustrated with the idea that people have to be taught to look beyond first impressions.
people are the types of people who need their looks to be ignored and seen past.	(SP) Jan is happy that the author included the idea that we need to look

Finally, I felt hopeful when I read this quote as well, because it shows that there are people in the world who can look past the superficial and materialistic ways of life and realize what virtues should be valued. I aspire to be this kind of person.	beyond beauty to see what is underneath. (TP) Jan also notices the stereotype behind "physical beauty." (SP) Jan is hopeful and personally makes a commitment to become a person who does not judge others by appearances. (TP) In approaching life, what a commendable stance to take!

How does interpreting a letter from the student's perspective enable a teacher to respond pedagogically? The teacher, through questioning the text, begins to understand Jan's perspective; and the teacher realizes that this perspective is embedded in a culture of youth and (female) perceptions of beauty that Jan struggles with. It is quite apparent that Jan's approach to writing a penbook letter is different from the approach that many students take. Students often discuss the elements of plot: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement, and resolution. However, some students include summary details to provide context for their personal opinions.

Jan takes a different way of writing about her reading. She quotes a passage from the novel that "speaks to her very strongly" and next provides some details from the story so the reader can place the quotation in context.

Jan devotes most of the letter to commenting on the passage that she has selected from the book. In a way she is demonstrating a hermeneutic of question and conversation that Gadamer (1975) sees as basic to the interpretive process. Jan is interested in the question of whether a pair of special glasses could change and deepen the relations among people and make for an improved world. She reflects on life without discrimination and stereotypes, and how suffering and tragedy seem to be catalytic in personal growth. It is interesting to note that in Jan's interpretation of the novel, she is actually engaging in Madison's (1988) criteria for interpretation. For example, Jan "penetrates" a passage from the story to explore, reveal, and address its meaning.

By the time Jan writes the concluding sentence of the letter, she makes a commitment to become the kind of person "who can look past the superficial and materialistic ways of life and realize what virtues should be valued."
What are Jan's interpretive intentions in writing about the novel? First, Jan is concerned with exploring what values are important in her life. Through her letter she discusses a number of ideas: People personally develop through what they experience. Suffering may lead to understanding. The world is not free of prejudice. People need to look past appearances to see the beauty that resides within others, and it is not easy to be tolerant but it is a worthy endeavor to live this way.

Now, from an English teacher's perspective, whose view also includes the formative experiences of the student, what underlying intentions have salience? Not only is Jan reading with more mature insights, she is developing some degree of comfort with applying literary concepts to her reading. Her last reading experience shows how closely she is able to identify with fictional characters and apply their realizations to her own life. Since the book is quite somber in terms of hope for the future, it may be important to recommend a book that shows how the individual can be a catalyst for social change that results in the "common good."

Can a teacher respond to Jan responsibly and pedagogically, considering both student and teacher perspectives? This kind of interpretation has potential for further exchanges between the teacher and the student. As Ellis says, "the aim of interpretive inquiry is not to write the end of an existing story but to write a more hopeful beginning for new stories" (1998, p. 10). An open response to a letter like this one is especially important because it will begin a dialogue that is likely to continue as Jan encounters other possible worlds in the fiction that she reads.

Critical Theory as Hermeneutics of Suspicion

In this section, I address how can critical theory can be understood as a methodology to provide guidelines for reading and interpreting student penbook letters about their reading experiences. I examine some selected student writings as examples and ask, how do some children show a (self-) critical sensitivity or openness to imperialist, ideological, or ethnocentric themes that are expressed or that inhere in the literature they read? Finally, I speculate briefly on the question, how may a teacher respond to student penbook letters from the perspective of a postcolonial hermeneutic of suspicion?

Critical theory as inquiry

Contemporary critical theory finds its expression in cultural, postcolonial, gender, feminist, and analytical forms of scholarship that investigate the ways that cultural, institutionalized, racist, sexist, and imperialist ideologies of the West have constructed distorted images of cultures, formerly colonized peoples, and oppressed voices through its Western histories, literature, and other academic and scholarly studies and epistemologies. The psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1967) is seen as an early postcolonial author. In *Black Skin, White Masks* he showed how the values and beliefs of the colonizers were subtly internalized by the colonized, resulting in distorted and self-destructive self-identities and twisted psyches.

Postcolonial theory is probably most closely identified with the seminal writings of Edward Said. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), he analyzed how the colonized are constructed by the colonizer. He exposed how West-European literature, art and non-fiction texts created the Orient as "other"—exotic, strange, inferior and subject to British and West European imperialist domination. By constructing non-Western peoples and cultures as "other" the colonizers could rationalize their economic, religious and cultural invasions.

Feminists such as Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1995) have applied postcolonial theory to the study of marginalized women who are doubly oppressed by the colonizing white men and their native men, turning these women into lower than others or subalterns. Typically the subalterns (women and children in patriarchal colonized societies) are silenced by their own internalized consciousness of having learned to see and accept themselves as subserving and inferior in their social and familial relations and positions.

Hermeneutics of suspicion

From the point of view of critical theory, the interpretive frameworks of various traditions of hermeneutics are not sensitive (critically reflective) enough of their own ideological roots and foundations. For example, the ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger, the hermeneutics of tradition of Gadamer, and the literary hermeneutics of intentionality appear less inclined to detect when the tradition-in-use of their own discourses is subverted by more powerful systemic forces of interpretive authority. In a debate between Habermas and Gadamer (1979) the conflict between the interpretive power of critical theory and that of hermeneutics led to a polarization of positions. In trying to overcome this philosophical stalemate, Paul Ricoeur (1970a) suggested that hermeneutics always needs to incorporate a guarded suspicion of unconscious significations, as well as an orientation of redemption.

Habermas had argued that it is the goal of critical theory to distrust and investigate the ruling ideological assumptions of accepted traditions in order to unmask the (hidden) systematically distorted communicative conditions that are associated with various forms of domination, oppression, and violence. Ricoeur broadened this gesture of suspicion of critical theory to the school of the three masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (see Stewart, 1995). Ricoeur asked, how can the hermeneutic consciousness of Gadamer and the critical consciousness of Habermas be engaged with myths, narratives and symbolic forms so as to bring about a restructuring of the various layers of recollected consciousness? (Smith, 1995, pp. 156, 157).

Marx would turn a hermeneutic of text into an emancipatory critique of ideology and of the economic structures that produce the false ideology. Nietzsche frees the interpretation of text from the dictates of foundational notions of truth and the authority of authorialism. And Freud directs the meaning of textual hermeneutic to the latent and unconscious layers of darker motives and repressed mechanisms (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 34). Postcolonial theory can be considered a contemporary example of such hermeneutics of suspicion since postcolonial critique also makes use of Marxist economic analysis of the relation between imperialist historical structures of western society and the production of relations of power, exploitation, and domination. Postcolonial thought also makes use of a radical Nietzschean style of critique of literary, religious, and philosophical traditions and thoughts. And postcolonial theory employs a Freudian or psycho-analytical type of depth hermeneutic of the structures of social and individual consciousness, as in the work of Fanon.

In his book *Learning to Divide the World* John Willinsky discusses and critiques the historical forces of British imperialism on its former colonies. Willinsky encourages the reader to re-think how "five centuries of studying, classifying, and ordering humanity within an imperial context gave rise to peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nation that were, in effect, conceptual instruments that the West used both to divide up and to educate the world" (1998, pp. 2, 3). The title *Learning to Divide the World* brings out several aspects of the notion of "division." The logocentric discourses of western ideologies tend to categorize (divide) the world by naming, claiming and objectifying its contents. By renaming the peoples, customs, beliefs, goods and traditions of the cultures in its colonial grasp, western thought divides the social reality into spheres of the centre and the margin, self and other--by "othering" the peoples and practices of those cultures. Colonial forces appropriated the territories they invaded by dividing their peoples and by differentially valuing their traditions as inferior, exotic, primitive, or worthless. And there is even a technical and calculating connotation to the way that Willinsky titles his book. The imperialist powers also divided the resources and the riches of the colonized in calculated divides that always disadvantaged the conquered, enslaved, dispossessed, and oppressed.

Willinsky's postcolonial critiques are especially relevant to education since he argues that the western educational system is largely responsible for teaching and perpetuating the differences that imperialism caused to separate us from those "others," whether those divides are racial, ethnic, material, religious, economic, gender-based or cultural. Willinsky argues that, "our schooling has not been so much the great redeemer of prejudices as the tireless chronicler of what divides us" (p. 1). Students are (unwittingly) taught to distinguish between civilized and primitive, West and East, developed and undeveloped, first and third world countries and, in doing so, differences are objectified.

Willinsky's book is separated into two sections: (1) Where is here? and (2) Monstrous lessons. Section one examines the effects of European imperialism, both in Europe and abroad. According to Willinsky, the Hegelian idea of "Willful Knowledge" (will to know) justified the domination of non-European peoples; as a result, the immense economic and financial gains of European countries could be rationalized. The fields of arts and science profited greatly and were reciprocated with ideologies of superiority as was seen in the Royal Society's universal history of nature. It was seen to be the West's responsibility to name everything: plants, animals, places, cultures, lands, peoples, and their customs and beliefs—in fact, the whole of the colonized world was relabeled, while native languages and indigenous forms of knowledge were ignored. In Willinsky's words, the Floating Fortress Lab "closed the circle of the globe, bringing the immense Pacific Ocean within the European ken" (p. 40).

Section two contains five chapters that outline how geography, science, language, and literature in schools should be examined for their place in imperialistic thought. Willinsky argues that there are pervasive remnants of imperialism very much in evidence today. Thus, there continues to be a marked distance between primitive and civilized people (first and third world countries); and "God's Christian will on earth" continues to serve as justification for the barbarianization of different beliefs and faiths.

Willinsky is highly critical of the centuries of European expansion and he maintains that the way in which we view and understand the world continues to be influenced by it. He recommends returning to the "original lessons" to discover how Europeans made sense of the new world. He proposes that teachers can help their students to unlearn the imperialist ideological habits and in some sense repair the mistakes of the past. What seems needed in education is a radical orientation of critical suspicion and doubt towards all cultural and political manifestations and consequences of the forces of imperialism.

In practical terms, what are the hermeneutic tools of postcolonial analysis? It appears that a hermeneutics of suspicion requires of the interpreter several methodical practices (see Robinson, 1995):

- A Gadamerian distanciation is required that effects or instills a reductive alienation of one's tradition. Rather than accept one's pre-understandings as necessary elements of the hermeneutic process, one must perform an act of distanciation or detachment, for the emancipation of a text from tradition-guided readings.
- A structural (historical, economic, political, genealogical) depth analysis of the semantic sources of the text.
- An interrogative critique of ideological voicings, openings, closures, and transgressions of the text.
- A preparedness to turn one's doubt and suspicion onto a critique of one's own critical hermeneutic, since it too can be entrenched in a polemic that has turned into a life all of its own (without contributing to understanding one's own accusations, idolatries, and personal investments).
- An interest in transforming one's self-understanding from previous illusory and false subjective sensibilities.

How can the above principles be interpreted by bringing them in relation to the pedagogical task of approaching student penbook letters? Below I try to formulate some questions or heuristic themes that may serve as a guide in examining the texts of student letters. These students were not especially initiated into reading literature (novels and stories) from a critical postcolonial mind-set. The interesting question is, however, whether and where in their writings these young people show openings and sensitivities that could turn into interpretive possibilities for engaging postcolonial issues. When students reflectively write about their reading experiences do their texts reflect ...

(1) a propensity to take on a critical attitude of doubt and/or suspicion about the fabula of the story?
(2) a preparedness to step back from a text and to take a critical distance?
(3) a sensitivity to culturally charged terminology, ideological language, problematic words, negative phrases, limitations of language?
(4) an awareness of structures of power relations that are embedded in textual elements such as dialogue and authorial voices?
(5) an ability to "see through" one's own (interpretive or critical) perspective by adopting an even more radical self-critical attitude?
(6) accounts of personal insight, critical realizations, desires to understand better, or an interest in improving one's own perspective on life?

Willinsky argues that what is taught in schools, what he calls "imperialism's achievements," needs to be reviewed, and that the atrocities and damages of these "achievements" require addressing. He recognizes that teachers often lack professional autonomy in selecting curriculum materials. Teachers, as a matter of routine, use textbooks and other curriculum items that inevitably retain elements of an imperialist flavor. So, Willinsky suggests that teachers work with their students to critique these materials (rather than throw them out) and that they provide opportunities for appropriate supplementary work. In his book, Willinsky asks teachers and students to reflect on the question, "Where is here"? (Who are you? What is behind you being here? What is your identity? How have you come to be who you are?) In trying to answer "Where is here?" students may wonder how they belong to where they are, and what separates them from others. Teachers need to be equipped to plan and structure curriculum so that students can understand and find answers to such questions.

For example, a teacher of a reading-writing program, would scrutinize a reader response program for traces of imperialist values, beliefs, and investments. To begin it is important to investigate both what a reading program includes and leaves out and who has been denied representation. And it is important to investigate the representational nature of cultural realities, economic predicaments, and social relations. This is what Willinsky refers to as the "ethics of accountability." He recommends that we create in our classrooms "a critical space ... that allows students to stand apart from ... representation[s] of the world" (p. 155).

However, in the final chapter of his book, Willinsky is not overly optimistic about giving students an account of their ancestral imperialistic conquests and sufferings. The best that we can hope for, he says, is that we must "supplement our education with a consideration of imperialism's influence on the teaching of history, geography, science, language, and literature in the hope that it will change the way this legacy works on us" (pp. 247, 263).

A reading and writing program that is based on Willinsky's suggestions would follow certain principles. There would be an emphasis on rational democratic participation. The aim of the program would be to create an "ideal" discourse classroom community. Underlying this community would be principles of justice, equality, and consensus. Students would communicate with each other and their teacher in their writing to find shared understandings and meaning in their lives. Students would recognize forms of oppression, racism, violence, poverty, and domination in the novels that they read and would be able to critically write about oppressive social structures in their personal reflections. Postcolonial problems would be understood at a social level and at the level of the economic structure of (global) society. In critical classrooms imperialist ideologies would be on trial. Not only would students possess the sensibility of critical reflection, they would be capable of responsible action in their own personal everyday lives. The nature of pedagogy would be political. According to Henry Giroux (1991), what is important to teach students is to critically evaluate the knowledge that they are being taught and their relationship to the curriculum.

Of course, teachers might ask, but how realistic is such postcolonial teaching to occur in everyday classrooms? Perhaps, critical theory as a practicing methodology in a language arts program of reading and writing does seem rather idealistic. Not only is it overly intellectual (it requires a radical critical mindedness on the part of teachers), it is also possible that teachers may find it difficult to motivate their students to adopt a critical attitude as a formative aspect of their personal being.

From a postcolonial perspective one needs to ask, what kinds of books are made available to students to read through their school libraries? What kinds of books do students themselves select to read? Many school librarians prepare lists of titles of recommended books that are available in the school library. The criteria that books meet to be on a reading list obviously would need to go beyond literary merit. Books containing stereotypes of Afro-Americans, for example, may actually be counter-effective in creating a critical environment in the classroom, unless they are indeed reflected on critically. How could this critical reflection be done? Sterling Brown identified three racial stereotypes that evolved in literature from the pre-Civil War period: "The Contented Slave, the Wretched Freeman, and the Comic Negro" (in MacCann & Woodard, 1985, p. 25). These stereotypes perpetuated the ideology of the plantation system and slavery. But what images, subtle or crude, are now perpetuating the present hegemonic ideology of the influence of Western capitalism and globalization? For example, Eloise Greenfield proposes that stringent criteria need to be developed that would enable the examination of "racist assumptions inherent in the treatment of the historical background, characterizations, use of language and terminology, and the culture and traditions of the minority groups presented in the material" (in MacCann & Woodard. 1985, p. 37).

Many novels may have the potential to expose the ideological beliefs, racist stereotypes, and unconscious cultural values of Western historical and contemporary life. Both teachers and students need to acquire the skills to identify and challenge racist content that appears in the texts that they encounter. They need to turn to novels that help students understand the influence of culture in the formation of human identity. Authors such as Alice Childress, Rosa Guy, and Walter Dean Myers are African-American novelists often cited for their explorations of growing up black in the United States of America. Library collections could be extended to include the literature of women, African Americans, Asians, Aboriginals, Hispanics, lesbians and gays. The selection criteria of literature would need to move beyond political correctness, stereotypes, recipes, and role models. Willinsky has articulated numerous concerns that may act as guides for the acquisition of collections in school libraries.

Of course, there is no guarantee that students will become more appreciative of differences and that minority students may find a greater sense of self-identity in the reading of novels that include them, but it would be a beginning. Educators like Joseph Auciello have argued that literature is not really an "effective medicine for social problems" (2002, p. 89). Auciello maintains that it makes no difference whether or not it is the traditional canon or the multicultural canon that is emphasized in schools; because what does matter is that students are (not readers but) consumers of popular culture in the form of video and electronic games, television and movies. It is true that the cultural influences are spread across many media. Books may not even be very powerful animators. And yet, in my view, good literature (if presented properly) may provide opportunities for critically reflecting on those other regions of cultural influence that games and television do not likely provide.

Engaging with student texts

Many student letters contain ideas that relate to how students see themselves and each other. Often, in trying to come to certain understandings of a story text, students seem to be trying to understand themselves. By creating space in curriculum for a program like Reading Room, students have the opportunity to grow to love good books through meaningful transformative experiences. Literature provides the context for students to become conscious of their world-view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and the system of social relations. Hazel Rochman points out that books can play a critical role:

> Books can make a difference in dispelling prejudice and building community; not with role models and literal recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. (2000, p. 19)

Some books have the power to unsettle us and raise doubts about what we thought was indubitable. Certain books may dispel stereotypes. Maxine Green writes that developing a sense of social justice involves an awareness of social agency. Through dialoguing about their reading experiences with others, students may "invent a project of remediation, palliation, repair" (cited by Ayers, et al., 1998).

I have selected three student penbook letters as examples. I analyze how these letters confirm, contradict, or show ambivalences of the awareness of postcolonial values that Willinsky discusses in his book.

The three letters are reproduced verbatim from the student penbooks. Three additional penbook letters that could be analyzed are included in Appendix 4.

Student letter 1

Dr. Zhivago (Boris Pasternak, 1958)

I am reading Boris Pasternak's classic novel Dr. Zhivago. It is amazing what he has created with his imagination. I find myself reading over each page twice so I can try to understand and make sure I don't miss all of the underlying messages in his work. I love how Pasternak's characters come to life. Their feelings are so real that I had forgotten that the story is fictitious.

Yury Zhivago is devastated when his mother dies. She is the only person in the world who could really bring a smile to his face. Little things always remind him of his mother. When he is reminded he often breaks down crying. One of Yury's friends, Misha Gordon, is actually the one who I want to know more about. Living in the Communist country of Russia and being a Jew is very difficult. Misha brings to life, in his very first thoughts, the terrors of anti-semitism, the treatment of an individual because of different beliefs. How can people judge others as not being as worthy of respect because other people have a different belief, language, or name? The amount of prejudice towards others is the most incredible thing that I have ever experienced. Learning of the Holocaust and of the other acts of terrible punishment towards the Jewish people scares me. To think that anyone could ever even think that he is better or stronger or has the right to punish anyone because of a slight difference! We all have feelings and I believe we all deserve equal treatment. Misha ever so young is hurt by the acceptance of all kinds of unjust acts towards his people. But really, can we say that we are better than someone else because our beliefs are better in our opinion? In my opinion the person who persecutes others because of his or her beliefs is worse. He is the one who isn't seeing straight. If I ever could fix one thing in this world it would be the stopping of persecution and unjust prejudice towards others. It is too bad that some people cannot see eye to eye on this issue.

Anyway, I am really enjoying Dr. Zhivago. I love Pasternak's interpretation of these events in Russian history. He is definitely one of the most amazing authors of our time.

Now, I annotate the student text, in an interpretive manner, for openings toward postcolonial themes.

student letter (Jen)	critical interpretation
I am reading Boris Pasternak's classic novel Dr. Zhivago. It is amazing what he has created with his imagination. I find myself reading over each page twice so I can try to understand and make sure I don't miss all of the underlying messages in his work. I love how Pasternak's characters come to life. Their feelings are so real that I had forgotten that the story is fictitious. *Yury Zhivago is devastated when his mother dies. She is the only person in the world who could really bring a smile to his face. Little things always remind him of his mother. When he is reminded he often breaks down crying. One of Yury's friends, Misha Gordon, is actually the one who I want to know more about. Living in the Communist country of Russia and being a Jew is very difficult. Misha brings to life, in his very first thoughts, the terrors of anti-semitism, the treatment of an individual because of different beliefs. How can people judge others as not being as worthy of respect because other people have a different belief, language, or*	The student recognizes the book as part of the canon of literature. Jen is aware that the text of a novel can be interpreted to contain "messages" at a deeper level. Rereading a page enables one to get at other meanings. (Is re-reading a form of distantiation?) There is a strong recognition of the power of familial relations (mother-son). Jen focuses on one of the characters in the novel, who is the victim of ethnic racism. She opens a relation between political systems, violence ("terror") and belief systems. Rather than pursuing the question of discrimination at the systemic level, she raises the ethical question at the individual level. (But at this level of personal responsibility people's actions

name? The amount of prejudice towards others is the most incredible thing that I have ever experienced. Learning of the Holocaust and of the other acts of terrible punishment towards the Jewish people scares me. To think that anyone could ever even think that he is better or stronger or has the right to punish anyone because of a slight difference! We all have feelings and I believe we all deserve equal treatment. Misha ever so young is hurt by the acceptance of all kinds of unjust acts towards his people. But really, can we say that we are better than someone else because our beliefs are better in our opinion? In my opinion the person who persecutes others because of his or her beliefs is worse. He is the one who isn't seeing straight. If I ever could fix one thing in this world it would be the stopping of persecution and unjust prejudice towards others. It is too bad that some people cannot see eye to eye on this issue. *Anyway I am really enjoying Dr. Zhivago. I love Pasternak's interpretation of these events in Russian history. He is definitely one of the most amazing authors of our time.*	cannot be "understood.") When we cannot understand the violent behavior of others, then these others become "scary." Notice how Jen critically steps back to question the discriminatory treatment of others by people in power. She reflects on differences that morally matter. Again, Jen recognizes that personal belief can blind people to persecuting others. Jen has a desire to change the injustices in the world. Jen does recognize that Pasternak's writing is an interpretation of Russian historical events. She "loves" his interpretation and does not cast doubt on it.

Reflection on student letter 1

Dr. Zhivago is one of the most famous love stories of all times, and one might have expected that the young reader gets involved in the drama of the love story. However, Jen takes a different interest and adopts a critical attitude and she focuses on the anti-Semitic strand (rather than on the intense love affair) in the novel. She notes that differences exist between people, and she presents her view that prejudice is wrong. People in power do not have the moral right to persecute others. Jen does not relate experiences of prejudice in the book to her own life directly, but she does condemn those who discriminate against others. Pasternak's writing (in translation) engages Jen strongly, and she accepts his interpretation of Russian historical events without question. Jen does not know how to relate prejudice at the individual level to the ideological structures of the system that produces these stigmas. This is where her critical mindedness is limited.

So, how does a teacher respond pedagogically and thoughtfully (with postcolonial sensitivities) to this student's writing? The teacher may begin by recognizing Jen's perceptiveness in adopting a critical stance in reading the novel. Since the novel can be described loosely as historical fiction, it may be suggested to the student that she research other sources of information on Russian history to explore anti-Semitism in other contexts. The teacher could suggest a few texts for Jen to read and examine. In the next Reading Room class, a mini-lesson could be devoted to book talks about Holocaust novels by such contemporary authors as Carol Matas, Anne Holm, and Ruth Minsky Snyder to encourage other students to share and dialogue with Jen in their penbook letters.

> *Student letter 2*
> *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break (Lensey Namioka, 1999))*
>
> *A little while ago, I read a wonderful novel called Ties That Bind, Ties That Break by Lensey Namioka. It was a fantastic book!*
> *This book is about a young girl named Ailin. Ailin is a part of the respectable Tao family. The Tao family lives in China. The story takes place in China around the year 1911.*

During this time, Chinese women followed the ancient practice of having their feet bound. This is an extremely painful tradition. The way feet binding works is that when a girl was younger than four, so probably around three (ages varied, however), white strips of cloth would be wrapped tightly around the little girl's feet. However, they would leave the big toe alone but the other four toes would be bent under the sole of the foot. This deformed the four toes because they would be folded under the sole of the foot like a piece of bread. This would be so painful because you would be walking on your toes! I cringed when I read about this tradition, and my feet began to hurt. Feet binding also gave the feet an awful smell because the bindings were so tight that no air would be allowed to escape and the sweat from the feet would get trapped. This gave bound feet an awful, unpleasant smell.

Women were forced to endure this terrible practice because men found women with tiny, wedged shape feet attractive. Only aristocratic women were forced to endure such torture; peasant women had to work, so it was impractical for them to bind their feet.

If I lived back in 1911 in China, I would want to be a peasant woman so my feet wouldn't be bound. Once your feet were bound, you couldn't run; you had to learn how to walk again because you didn't have toes anymore. Women with bound feet hobbled around because it was too painful not to. When young girls had their feet bound, they would have to lie in bed for weeks because it hurt too much to walk. This must have been awful!

I couldn't imagine ever doing that to myself. The Chinese women who had their feet bound were very brave for living with the pain and suffering that it must have caused.

The protagonist in this novel is Ailin Tao. She is a very strong and courageous woman I admire very much. Ailin's first act of bravery was when she was five years old. This was when she refused to have her feet bound. This greatly upset her mother because Ailin's arranged marriage to Hanwei Lui was called off because her feet weren't bound. After that, the matchmaker couldn't find a respectable family for Ailin to marry into *because no family would have their son marry a woman with unbound feet. I found this to be sexist! To judge the quality of a woman on whether or not her feet are tiny is wrong. I understand it was the times and it wasn't necessarily the men's fault. They had grown up in a specific time and were a product of it. However, I am very glad times have changed.*

I thought it was so brave of Ailin at five years old to defy her family and the age old tradition of foot binding. She was only five years old; yet, she stood up for herself and followed her heart. This was so brave of her, and I really admire her for it. After this, Ailin goes on to public American school, another act of defiance because rich families had their children privately tutored. Also, the school was run by foreigners, and the Chinese hated foreigners around that time. Then after her father died her uncle took her out of school So Ailin snuck out of her home so she could get tutored by her English teacher, Miss Gilbertson. Ailin did this so she could continue her education. Following that, Ailin became a nanny for an American missionary family because her uncle wanted her to become a concubine. Eventually she moved to America with this family, stayed there, and was married. All of these acts were acts that took a great deal of courage to do. Ailin followed her heart and did what was best for her, something a lot of women were scared to do. She is an inspiration to women everywhere. I admire and respect her very much.

Thanks for reading my letter.

Here follows the interpretive annotation:

student letter (Anne)	critical interpretation
A little while ago, I read a wonderful novel called Ties That Bind, Ties That Break by Lensey Namioka. It was a fantastic book! *This book is about a young girl named Ailin. Ailin is a part of the respectable Tao family. The Tao family*	Anne considers it noteworthy to situate

lives in China. The story takes place in China around the year 1911.	the novel in its historical and cultural context.
During this time, Chinese women followed the ancient practice of having their feet bound. This is an extremely painful tradition. The way feet bending works is that when a girl was younger than four, so probably around three (ages varied, however), white strips of cloth would be wrapped tightly around the little girl's feet. However, they would leave the big toe alone but the other four toes would be bent under the sole of the foot. This deformed the four toes because they would be folded under the sole of the foot like a piece of bread. This would be so painful because you would be walking on your toes! I cringed when I read about this tradition, and my feet began to hurt. Feet binding also gave the feet an awful smell because the bindings were so tight that no air would be allowed to escape and the sweat from the feet would get trapped. This gave bound feet an awful, unpleasant smell.	She makes a critical assessment of an ancient practice of Chinese society. Notice how Anne vicariously experiences the pain of foot binding.
Women were forced to endure this terrible practice because men found women with tiny, wedged shape feet attractive. Only aristocratic women were forced to endure such torture; peasant women had to work, so it was	Here Anne establishes a structural relation between, on the one hand, a cultural ideal of female beauty and foot binding practice accepted and internalized by aristocratic Chinese women, and, on the other hand, the

impractical for them to bind their feet. *If I lived back in 1911 in China, I would want to be a peasant woman so my feet wouldn't be bound. Once your feet were bound, you couldn't run; you had to learn how to walk again because you didn't have toes anymore. Women with bound feet hobbled around because*	patriarchal position, role and power of men. She also notes that for economic reasons working class women could remain free from the oppressive practice of foot binding.
it was too painful not to. When young girls had their feet bound, they would have to lie in bed for weeks because it hurt too much to walk. This must have been awful!	Despite what Anne knows about the harsh life of peasant women, she would choose this kind of lifestyle rather than have her feet bound.
I couldn't imagine ever doing that to myself. The Chinese women who had their feet bound were very brave for living with the pain and suffering that it must have caused.	Here, Anne recognizes the courage of Chinese women who endured the pain in getting their feet bound. (Anne does not consider the paradox of this courage of women to submit to the pain.)
The protagonist in this novel is Ailin Tao. She is a very strong and courageous woman I admire very much. Ailin's first act of bravery was when she was five years old. This was when she refused to have her feet bound. This greatly upset her mother because Ailin's arranged marriage to Hanwei Lui was called off because her feet weren't bound. After that, the matchmaker couldn't find a respectable family for Ailin to marry into because no family	Anne feels that Chinese women are brave to endure the painful practice but she also feels that the protagonist Ailin is brave to refuse the painful practice.
would have their son marry a woman with unbound feet. I found this to be	Anne recognizes sexist values in traditional Chinese society.

sexist! To judge the quality of a woman on whether or not her feet are tiny is wrong. I understand it was the times and it wasn't necessarily the men's fault. They had grown up in a specific time and were a product of it. However, I am very glad times have changed.	Here, Anne seems to take a critical distance and recognizes that foot binding was a Chinese cultural tradition despite its sexist nature. She feels that it is not correct to blame the men. Rather she attributes the practice to "the times."
I thought it was so brave of Ailin at five years old to defy her family and the age old tradition of foot binding. She was only five years old; yet, she stood up for herself and followed her heart. This was so brave of her, and I really admire her for it. After this, Ailin goes on to public American school, another act of defiance because rich families had their children privately tutored. Also, the school was run by foreigners, and the Chinese hated foreigners around that time. Then after her father died her uncle took her out of school So Ailin snuck out of her home so she could get tutored by her English teacher, Miss Gilbertson. Ailin did this so she could continue her education. Following that, Ailin became a nanny for an American missionary family because her uncle wanted her to become a concubine.	Notice that Anne mentions the dislike of foreigners in China, but does not make any mention of its likely colonial context. There is no recognition of the postcolonial role of missionary religion and the structure of a power relation in her role as nanny.
Eventually she moved to America with this family, stayed there, and was married. All of these acts were acts that took a great deal of courage to do. Ailin	Anne expresses the western individualist value of personal choice

followed her heart and did what was best for her, something a lot of women were scared to do. She is an inspiration to women everywhere. I admire and respect her very much. *Thanks for reading my letter.*	and self-fulfillment. But she ascribes the protagonist's actions to be a matter of following "the heart."

Reflection on student letter 2

Anne learns a lot about the Chinese tradition of foot binding during the early 20th century from reading this novel. She is critical of the practice as she empathizes with the pain endured by these aristocratic Chinese women. Anne recognizes the inequality in societal power relationships between men and women, and between upper and lower social classes. But it is clear that Lensey Namioka's novel is written from a western individualistic perspective. The main character is admirably portrayed as invested with values (of individualism, personal ambition, challenging authority, self-fulfillment) that are prized by contemporary North American society.

How does a teacher respond with postcolonial sensitivities to this letter? Obviously, there are several paradoxes and contradictions at work in the novel that Anne is responsive to. But she is not fully aware of these contradictions of reading a North American novel written by an Asian author. A teacher could suggest that Anne find out more about similar cultural practices and the roots of such practices--such as female genital mutilation in some African cultures; the practice of sharia (stoning), a God-given code for punishing especially women for offences such as adultery. Here Spivac's notion of subaltern would be applicable as a critical theme. A teacher might also try to instill a sense of suspicion about the contradictory nature of Ailin's adoption in a missionary family. There is the obvious instrumental role of missionary religion in destroying traditional Chinese philosophies and opening up the ideology of Asian society to imperialist invasion and exploitation. Willinsky argues that, "Christianity took advantage of imperial conquest to achieve its own form of global expansion" (p. 94). The missionary conquest is one that students need to read about and re-evaluate. As well, many women from South Asian countries are currently employed in North American (but also Hong Kong and other Asian cities) families as nannies. The teacher may try to develop a relation between the various historical themes of the book and contemporary cultural practices.

> *Student letter 3*
> Nightjohn *(Gary Paulsen)*
>
> *I have now completed my fourth and final novel of this term and of the year! I read the novel you recommended called* Nightjohn *by Gary Paulsen. This book was about a female slave named Sarny, who works at the Waller Plantation. One day a new slave by the name of Nightjohn is brought in with a rope around his neck and scars covering his body. Nightjohn had escaped north to Canada but has sacrificed his freedom to teach young slaves to read. He wants slaves to learn to read and write so they can write about the hardships that they endure on plantations. Sarny trades tobacco with Nightjohn in exchange for the knowledge of letters and numbers. Unfortunately, Waller, the head of the plantation, catches Sarny writing letters in the dirt. Sarny runs to her mamy and when her mamy insists she does not know anything about reading or writing, Waller beats her. Nightjohn cannot bear to see Mamy being beaten; he confesses that he is the person who has been teaching reading and writing. Waller cuts off two of Nightjohn's toes as punishment. Despite the incredible amount of pain, Nightjohn successfully escapes. Later, however, he returns and sets up a school for slaves to secretly attend at night.*
>
> *I agree that although this novel is written at a low reading level, it deals with a mature subject. The incredible hardships black people suffered in the United States are depicted vividly in this novel. For example, Gary Paulsen writes: "He hit her with his fists. Then he unhooked her from the chains and ripped her clothes from off her body and dragged her naked to the harness. 'Put it on—I feel like a ride in the buggy'… Waller climbed into the buggy*

and sat in the seat. He reached under the footboard and came up with a whip." Nightjohn is filled with similar scenes of violence and torture. The incredibly strong will that Nightjohn showed towards his goal of ensuring slaves could read and write was prominent in this novel. Nightjohn knew that he would be punished with cruelty, but was willing to take that risk. Nightjohn wanted slaves to write about their experiences working at plantations. He didn't want the immense hardships his people had suffered to be forgotten. Despite the fact that Nightjohn had been beaten and wounded, he continued to work towards his goals. People living in our society could learn from this determination and apply it to their own lives. One thing that I found confusing in this novel was the question of where Nightjohn had learned to read and write. The author doesn't inform the readers as to where Nightjohn was educated. Perhaps he learned from a person like himself who inspired him to teach others. Hopefully, when Nightjohn passes away Sarny will take his place and continue his mission. The saddest aspect of the novel is the fact that many people truly experienced the torment that the slaves at the Waller Plantation endured. Although this is a work of fiction, it could have easily been a true story. The cruel and unnecessary treatment of black people in the United States is all too real. Novels like Nightjohn remind us of these sorrowful events and hopefully help to prevent similar tragedies from occurring in the future.

Interpretive annotation:

student letter (Kevin)	critical interpretation
I have now completed my fourth and final novel of this term and of the year! I read the novel you recommended called Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen. This book was about a female slave named Sarny, who works at the Waller Plantation. One day a new slave by the name of Nightjohn is brought in with a	

rope around his neck and scars covering his body. Nightjohn had escaped north to Canada but has sacrificed his freedom to teach young slaves to read. He wants slaves to learn to read and write so they can write about the hardships that they endure on plantations. Sarny trades tobacco with Nightjohn in exchange for the knowledge of letters and numbers. Unfortunately, Waller, the head of the plantation, catches Sarny writing letters in the dirt. Sarny runs to her mamy and when her mamy insists she does not know anything about reading or writing, Waller beats her. Nightjohn cannot bear to see Mamy being beaten; he confesses that he is the person who has been teaching reading and writing. Waller cuts off two of Nightjohn's toes as punishment. Despite the incredible amount of pain, Nightjohn successfully escapes. Later, however, he returns and sets up a school for slaves to secretly attend at night. *I agree that although this novel is written at a low reading level, it deals with a mature subject. The incredible hardships black people suffered in the United States are depicted vividly in this novel. For example, Gary Paulsen writes: "He hit her with his fists. Then he*	Kevin recognizes and accepts the noble goal of sacrificing oneself for the ideal of literacy, and for the slaves to be able to remember and record their personal history accurately. Kevin sees the inhumanity of the white man Waller; and the humanity of the black man Nightjohn. Kevin notes how strong and determined Nightjohn is when he escapes from the plantation despite the amputation of two toes. And yet, Nightjohn returns again to the dangerous mission of teaching black people to read and write. The physical torture and suffering are described so vividly that Kevin copies the graphic language.

unhooked her from the chains and ripped her clothes from off her body and dragged her naked to the harness. ‘Put it on—I feel like a ride in the buggy’… Waller climbed into the buggy and sat in the seat. He reached under the footboard and came up with a whip.” Nightjohn is filled with similar scenes of violence and torture.	
The incredibly strong will that Nightjohn showed towards his goal of ensuring slaves could read and write was prominent in this novel. Nightjohn knew that he would be punished with cruelty, but was willing to take that risk. Nightjohn wanted slaves to write about their experiences working at plantations. He didn’t want the immense hardships his people had suffered to be forgotten. Despite the fact that Nightjohn had been beaten and wounded, he continued to work towards his goals. People living in our society could learn from this determination and apply it to their own lives.	Kevin identifies with Nightjohn and describes his motives, strong will, and feelings. (But can this understanding really be of the black experience?)
One thing that I found confusing in this novel was the question of where Nightjohn had learned to read and write. The author doesn’t inform the readers as to where Nightjohn was educated. Perhaps he learned from a person like himself who inspired him to teach	In this place Kevin raises suspicion and critical questions about the truth of the story.

others. Hopefully, when Nightjohn passes away Samy will take his place and continue his mission.	Here, he expresses his ideals and hopes.
The saddest aspect of the novel is the fact that many people truly experienced the torment that the slaves at the Waller Plantation endured. Although this is a work of fiction, it could have easily been a true story. The cruel and unnecessary treatment of black people in the United States is all too real. Novels like Nightjohn remind us of these sorrowful events and hopefully help to prevent similar tragedies from occurring in the future.	Kevin feels that, although the novel is fiction, it shows what really happened to Afro-Americans. He feels that this kind of novel about black people's lives and suffering may make people critically aware.

Reflection on student letter 3

Nightjohn is a novel written by a white author about the horrendous brutalities and inhumanities inflicted on black slaves under their white masters on the plantations in the Southern United States. No doubt this book makes a strong impression on its readers. Students who read this book vicariously witness the evils of racism, and the enslavement, exploitation, and oppression of blacks by whites. The book is written in such graphic and vivid details that young people tend to be very moved by the plight, fate, and courage of the black people.

Many teachers would value the novel *Nightjohn* for its power to show young readers some of the horrid histories of heinous and hateful white society. Certainly Kevin seems quite moved and impressed by the story. But Willinsky's postcolonial perspective now makes me more aware of the questionable worth of making white students feel bad for blacks—if these feelings are not contextualized by a sharper understanding of the imperialist systemic forces that shaped the economic and political realities of slavery and plantation economies. It is doubtful that a young reader could truly gain a sense of the black experience, even from a novel as well intended and well written as *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen. In fact, a commentator like Julius Lester might consider this literature by whites about blacks totally useless and ill-conceived.

And yet, I would not want to simply reject a book such as this. But perhaps, with a book as emotionally charged as *Nightjohn*, students could be brought to important understandings that go beyond the book. Kevin seems to realize that literacy was valuable to the slaves but considered dangerous by the plantation owners—education and religious proselytization in the colonial world were based on the interests of serving the colonizer and the colonial state, not the colonized or slave. As long as the ideological assumptions of "primitive versus civilized" were perpetuated by those who profited, white people would continue to dominate the Afro-American peoples. Waller named his slave Nightjohn, which in a way was like staking a verbal claim on him as possession.

Conclusion

In this chapter I applied the interpretive perspectives of discourse analysis, (auto)biography and narrativity, hermeneutics, and critical theory as hermeneutics of suspicion to selected penbook letters. Each of these perspectives provides ways of understanding student writings. However, these interpretive perspectives are not inherently pedagogical in their orientation. For example in the last reflection on *Nightjohn* the critical perspective provides a way of understanding potential themes of racism and post-colonialism as substantive dimensions of both the novel and the student letter as literary texts. But the teacher is still challenged to consider how the novel and the reflection have pedagogical significance for this particular student. This realization makes me turn to pedagogy as the foundational orientation for all the other perspectives. The next chapter will address this pedagogical challenge.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PEDAGOGY OF EPISTOLATORY WRITING ABOUT READING

Epistolatory writing complicates the textual experience of reading. The student enters the social space with the reader of the penbook in an epistolatory manner, but the conversational relation is only indirectly about the self. Rather the student is expected to write about the reading experience that is on one level reflexive (preconscious) and on another level reflective (thinkingly conscious). It is therefore easier for the student to relate to the teacher (or an other penbook correspondent) in a personal manner about the reading.

Thus a unique pedagogical situation or space is created where the relationality between teacher and student is infused with the textual relationality of the fictional space between the student and the book and the self-referential relation between the student and his or her reflective self. For example, in making reflective sense of the reading experience, the student will be inclined to respond to the literary aspects of the novel in a deeper and more personally engaged manner. It is easier to talk about the self through the mediation of recognizing one's self, one's beliefs, feelings and values, or one's life in the virtual reality of the text.

The teacher gains insights, not just into the curricular learning outcomes, but more deeply into the (trans)formative growth of the student. This is ultimately what constitutes the significance of the present study: How is the epistolatory writing about reading a pedagogical concern for the teacher? Throughout the study I have presented pedagogical comments, discussions, and digressions. The epistolatory explications show how the penbook incarnates a textual relation between teacher and student; the interpretive perspectives offer insights into possible pedagogical strategies, responses, significances, and interpretive practices. Here the pedagogical dimension is placed as the central concern of the entire study.

Here, I will discuss the nature of the penbook letter in terms of three pedagogical aspects: (1) personal and relational, (2) intentional, and (3) ethical or moral dimensions of teaching.

Personal and Relational Dimensions of the Penbook Letter

Teachers stand in relationships of influence and affectivity with their students. Of course, many teachers realize that they are more than technicians involved in "facilitating" student learning for measurable outcomes. From a pedagogical point of view, teachers are, *in loco parentis*, persons who carry responsibility for the young people under their educational care. Learning happens in relation with teachers. The worth of what and how things are learned requires relational sensitivities, qualities, and abilities that ask for involvements that are moral, personal, emotional, and professional.

Pedagogy is personal. It involves seeing the student as a person, not merely as a "learner" who fits a certain profile or learner descriptors. Pedagogy also involves opening oneself as teacher to one's students so that they in turn may see their teacher as a person. The penbook letter is personal and encourages the formation of a relationship between the student and teacher. After participating for three months in Reading Room, John, a grade nine student, revealed much about himself in this penbook letter, which in turn helped his teacher to understand him in a very personal way.

> *I have just finished the book* *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* *by Mark Haddon. This book was very entertaining for me because it was so abstract. The main character, Christopher, is a very "special" boy. He hates the colors brown and yellow, hates physical contact, can't understand human emotions, judges how good his day will be by the colors of passing cars, and is doing A-Level math.*
> *Wellington, the neighbor's dog, has been mysteriously murdered, and Chris is trying to figure out who did it. Much sleuthing leads to his finding a box of old letters in his father's room that contradict the story that his mother had died of a heart attack. After being confronted about the letters, his father*

> *admits to killing Wellington in a fit of rage. This frightens Christopher because he doesn't trust his father anymore, so he decides to travel to London all alone to live with his mother.*
>
> *I believe that Christopher is a lot like us in many ways. We all have our little fears and anxieties and Chris is just our own feelings multiplied. Like Chris, we all aren't very comfortable when there are too many people around, and when there is too much information flooding our brains. And we all have our own little quirks. I, for example, am most comfortable when things are balanced. I become uneasy when my pant leg brushes against a door and the other side doesn't. So I might casually brush the other side, just to even things out. I also don't like odd numbers. I like even numbers, preferably multiples of two and four. I am also very sensitive to changes in my environment. I like to have things set up perfectly and have things set up my way. I find it hard to work, as well, when other people are in the room with me. This may explain my slow or non-existent class work. I am a creature of habit, and so I could easily relate to Chris's dilemma. I don't know if everyone has as many quirks as I do, but I think we can all see a bit of ourselves in Chris. This is why I think this book is a best seller. People like characters that they can relate to and I think Chris is surreal and funny, while still allowing the reader to connect to him. I look forward to writing again.*

In his letter, John first sketches some of the features of the main character of the book—a boy, Chris, who suffers severely from obsessive compulsions. Next, John reflects on the fact that many people have quirks that they have to deal with in their lives. Finally, he focuses in on his own life and reflects on his personal obsessions. The letter enables John to move from the fictional story about Chris, to people in general, to his personal life. And by writing about it, John not only lets his teacher know, he also comes to a certain self-awareness that the teacher witnesses. The teacher knows that there is a certain safety and comfort in knowing that the little obsessions in one's own life are shared by others. And it is true that one out of fifty people suffers from some degree of obsessive compulsive disorder.

Of course, it is not a teacher's responsibility to make medical diagnoses; yet, it is important to be cognizant of what various children are experiencing in their lives. Sometimes, a teacher must act on the suspicion that a certain student experiences problems that interfere with ordinary life functioning. To be sensitive to the inner life of the child is indeed a pedagogical aspect of teaching. For example, a teacher may need to talk with the parents to discuss if they are aware of their child's challenges. In John's case a teacher knew that there were reasons why John sometimes may have had difficulty finishing his work in time. While John may not have heard about OCD, it is good that the teacher has some insights. Indeed many children suffer from problems that even their parents are unaware of and that these children have to deal with and bear all on their own.

Some teachers may not be aware which of their students are confronted with personal issues, mental problems, or physical difficulties that make school and learning for these students especially challenging. It all depends on whether a teacher manages to develop pedagogical relations with his or her students. Different subjects offer different opportunities to develop pedagogical relations. But teachers must be willing to orient to the students pedagogically and not just treat the students in the role of instructor of the school subject. The pedagogy of teaching asks of teachers a certain thoughtfulness and tact, and it also demands extra effort and time. Not all language arts teachers are willing to maintain a Reading Room program that requires significant additional investment of time to constantly read the students' letters and in turn respond to the students in writing.

Students like John show how incredibly important it is for teachers to understand the educational benefits to the students of efforts such as the Reading Room program. In reading penbook letters, teachers are privy to students exploring and redefining their identities. Because the penbook letter is a personal letter and by its very nature private, it offers the students opportunities to not only share understandings about the book they are reading but also opinions and feelings and sometimes confidences with their teachers and with other students. So it becomes important for John's teacher to honor the trust and the confidences that he has shared about his fears, anxieties and personal quirks.

To develop a pedagogic relation a teacher may come to understand her students in a caring and responsible way. She possesses not only a professional, but also a personal commitment and interest in children's education and their growth toward mature adulthood. Developing a pedagogical relationship requires time, observation and tact on the part of a teacher. An awareness of the student's difficulties and strengths may guide a teacher to write appropriate responses to penbook letters. Over time, as penbook letters are exchanged, a teacher may gain even more insight into the lives of her students. At the same time, a teacher may become even more sensitive to the student's literary experiences while understanding his or her interests, excitements, fears and vulnerabilities. Such pedagogical understanding of the students' learning and personal growth enables a teacher to tactfully encourage and offer support when and where needed.

The German educator Nohl spoke of the pedagogical relation as a relation *sui generis*, valuable in and of itself. He suggested that "among the few relationships granted to us during our lives such as friendship, love, and fellowship in the workplace, perhaps the relationship to a real teacher is the most basic one, one that fulfills and shapes our being most strongly" (see van Manen, 1994, p. 143). And so the existence of the pedagogical relationship is the catalyst that sparks the student to reveal his or her inner thoughts and experiences. Our relation to a real teacher, says Nohl, is to a person in whose presence we experience a heightened sense of self and a real growth and the formation of personal identity. And because the relationship of the teacher and student is a very personal one, it mediates and guards the cognitive, social, ethical, and emotional growth and maturation of the young person.

As a teacher develops a personal relationship with each of her students, she is better able to create the kind of classroom community where students also form personal relationships with each other. A classroom has the possibility of becoming a safe and open space when students "see" each other and are eager to understand, support, and trust one another. With this sense of trust on the part of students towards their teacher and classmates, the pedagogical sphere has a very good chance of flourishing.

As students write penbook letters about their literary experiences, they also discover more about their writing voices. And the writing voice is connected to one's sense of identity. Tom Romano argues that "writing is the writer. It embodies her voice, her passion, her thinking, her intellect, her labor, and on some occasions, her very soul" (1987, p. 125). Reading poetry, novels, and stories should not be a means to an end but rather the reading is an end in itself. The writing of penbook letters continues and completes the reading. When reading happens, there is a humanizing consequence: a deepening of the self, authentic learning.

In this letter Geoff explores his ideas about freedom and change while reflecting on a quotation from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (2003).

> *I have selected a quote from the book I am currently reading called Nineteen Eighty-four by George Orwell. This quote reads, "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two makes four. If that is granted, all else follows" (p. 84). The context of this quote is when George Orwell talks about how the party could say two plus two equals five and no one could do anything about it.*
>
> *This quote is important to me because one of my values is the ability to speak my mind. In Nineteen Eighty-four the party dictates what is true and what is false, regardless of the logic applied. Just as the quote relates to this book, I think that if something is wrong and is forced upon you, it is your right to be able to challenge that fact or system. While sometimes blind faith is necessary, in an everyday setting, it is necessary to question the rules and regulations placed on us by authority. This is the basis of democracy. If everyone just kept their heads down and moved with the*

> *pack, then we would not move forward as a society. The constant questioning of our laws and government is what prompts change. Laws are made because the old ones become outdated and ineffective. The constant changing of life is what makes life worth living. As Krista Blake (a teen AIDS victim discussed in our health class) said, "Live your life. Live, do not just exist." In life we all have a purpose and that is to make a change or make a difference. All goals or decisions can be directly linked to a mood for change, no matter how big or small the change may be. The right to question authority is the right to live with purpose. Change and choice are what make us unique. All cultures in the world are based on personal choice and preference. Without change, there would be no culture, no art, and no language. Change is not only favored, it is vital to our existence. Like water or air, change gives us the power to get up every day and face the world. This is what the quote means to me.*

The writing of a letter like Geoff's shows his teacher that he has experienced a kind of deepening of the self. What the student learns here is not learning that can be equated with measurable outcomes; instead, the learning can be seen as a step towards maturation.

The Interpretive Dimension of the Penbook Letter

What a teacher keeps foremost in her mind when reading penbook letters is always what is the most appropriate response for this student at this time. A teacher must constantly be able to interpret and understand the present situation and experiences of her students in order to detect subtle clues that appear in penbook letters. Once the teacher has taken the time to interpret the clues, she may then step back and reflect on what is the most appropriate way to respond to the students' letters.

For example, a student may have written confidential information about himself that resulted from close identification with one of the characters in a book. How should a teacher then respond? Of course, to answer this question is not always easy. The insights may be hidden, and at the beginning a teacher often "feels her way" in the writing. The tone of a teacher's writing is tentative so as not to appear invasive. Pedagogical thoughtfulness often requires the action of holding back. Keeping the communication channels open is necessary for the student's responses to become more self reflective in nature. How the student writes in the subsequent letter to a teacher is an indication of a teacher's pedagogical thoughtfulness. A teacher knows that the pedagogical relationship is moving forward when the penbook letter is marked by responsiveness on the part of the student.

For example, Winston is a grade nine student who adores Kurt Cobain, the famous and deceased heavy metal rock musician. He is reading Cobain's biography for the second time and shares his ideas in his penbook letter at the beginning of the school year. What should a sensitive teacher make of this letter? Winston reveals a lot about himself in this letter.

> *I am about a quarter way through a book entitled Heavier Than Heaven, a biography of the late famous musician Kurt Cobain. This is my second time reading this book and I am thoroughly enjoying it.*
> *The reason I decided to read this novel once again is the author did an extraordinary job of documenting Kurt's life; thus, the novel is jam packed with information. This novel really digs into Kurt's soul. Also Kurt Cobain is my idol and I love his music so I enjoy this novel more than any other novel I've ever read.*
> *One of the reasons this biography is so interesting was Kurt's life was quite the amusing story. He was born in Aberdeen, Washington, a logging town that had a high unemployment and as Kurt would say was "full of rednecks." The novel does a very good job of describing this dark dreary town that looks out on Grays Harbor. The first thing everybody noticed about Kurt was actually the first thing I noticed about him, his eyes. It's hard to describe why but they just are so beautiful and they really grab you.*
> *His youth was much like others at the beginning until his parents' divorce. After reading this novel for the first time I thought the divorce shaped his*

personality more than anything else in his life. So far I think the same. The divorce made him fairly anti-social and for the rest of his life he would become much more isolated. After the divorce he moved in with his father. At first they had a very loving relationship but after his father remarried despite promising Kurt otherwise things went quite sour. His father became Kurt's main adversary. I think it's put best in one of my favorite songs written by Kurt called "Serve the Servants" where he bellows "I tried hard to have a father but instead I had a dad."

Another reason I find this novel so interesting is Kurt reminds me a lot of myself. First off we both embellish some stories of our lives (him to further degree). We also both love music, and are not into playing sports. We both detest the right wing and we are both anti-social and isolate ourselves. Kurt was also quite the storyteller which makes this book even more interesting. This book reveals that many of the things be said in interviews were embellished stories. Although they were embellished they were quite interesting, and the real stories weren't that boring either. The main embellished story was how he always said that at one point he lived under a bridge. He lived in many strange places but a bridge was not one of them. He refers to his life under a bridge in another one of his (in my humble opinion) masterpieces entitled "Something in the Way."

Overall words simply cannot describe how much I love this novel because I just think Kurt was such an amazing person who was often misunderstood. I also think he was just the dynamic character, a character too deep for most and who was just so musically gifted. His music controls my every emotion and now the more I read this novel the more I enjoy his music because this novel helps you understand where the pain that is so evident in his music is coming from. The more I read this book the more it affects me as a person. A novel never ever comes close to affecting me. This is so far the first novel to make me laugh and the first novel to make me cry on the same page. I have about another 200 pages left and the excitement is overwhelming so I must end this letter.

> *Kurt was disturbing, yet an unbelievably beautiful human being. He will forever be etched in my heart and will forever influence me in the most positive ways. I think his at one time foster father Dave Reed said it best: "He had the desperation, not the courage, to be himself. Once you do that, you can't go wrong, because you can't make any mistakes when people love you for being yourself. But for Kurt, it didn't matter that other people loved him; he simply didn't love himself enough."*

This student penbook letter poses a number of challenges at various levels of interpretation. How should a teacher respond to the letter? Winston really appreciates Kurt Cobain; in fact, he idolizes him and his music. Winston reveals that this book has affected him deeply and he feels that he has a lot in common with Kobain. After a quick reading of the letter, a teacher recognizes instructionally that Winston has read the book carefully, is able to write about its contents, make connections, relate the book to his own life, and has enjoyed the reading experience. Also, Winston can hardly wait to finish reading the book for the second time. But what makes a teacher hesitate and carefully construct her words when writing a response?

Winston's letter is very open, inviting, and personal. Winston risks revealing what moves him, how he feels, and what matters to him. In writing back to Winston, a teacher reflects on what is the most appropriate response for him at this time. Pedagogy cannot be separated from the instructional dimension of Language Arts.

As Reading Room becomes routine in the life of the classroom, students gain confidence in their letter writing abilities. Letters become longer, more detailed, and reflective. Students are eager to read their teacher's response. Occasionally, I have missed reading a student letter, and on more than one occasion have heard, "you didn't write back to me." A teacher is able to positively recognize her students frequently and privately through the letter response. This dialogue serves as a vehicle for deepening the pedagogical relationship.

Ethical or Moral Dimension of the Penbook Letter

The responsibility that teachers carry towards their students is not one to be taken lightly and should not descend into a relationship of domination. Max van Manen (1991) writes about how deeply teachers may affect their students' lives. A great teacher's influence is sutured into our flesh so that it is now impossible to conceive of our sense of self without this influence. How teachers respond to their students or recognize them in everyday interactions in the classroom or in writing through a reader-response approach like Reading Room has ethical significance.

Recognition involves taking the time to "see" students. A teacher may try to demonstrate that she sees her students through listening to them and recognizing their ideas and opinions. This kind of action has the possibility of transforming the student. Students are quick to see and react to negative beliefs, and positive beliefs can strengthen the student's actual performance. It is important for teachers to realize that 'belief' has the creative power to actually bring forth what is believed about the other person. A teacher who has pedagogical qualities shows belief and encouragement and gives students recognition. These beliefs may strengthen the positive faculties that the teacher presumes present in the student. It is almost as if a teacher lures these abilities out of the young person with his or her belief. If the teacher thinks highly about a student's ability, attitude, and efforts, then his or her belief may actually awaken and corroborate these qualities in the student. Teachers frequently seem to act intuitively in the sense of what seems to be "good" or "appropriate" for a student; however, we need to reflect more deeply on the nature of the experiences into which we coax, or deliberately or inadvertently guide the student.

What happens to the teacher as she approaches the penbook letter? In a sense the teacher should become the student as reader. To respond pedagogically, the teacher needs to have a sense of the child who is writing. What is required of the teacher when approaching the penbook letter is a kind of internal reading of the text, a kind of listening to what is going on behind the text. For example, sometimes the length of the letter represents the hidden feelings of the student rather than what is written in the letter. Typically, students who write very little may be showing a teacher that reading is not very absorbing or meaningful to them. This may be a signal for a teacher to find a book that engages that student. In an internal reading of the letter, a teacher may notice the student's struggle to find the right words. The handwriting may be small and illegible; perhaps, the student hopes the teacher will gloss over the letter, paying little attention to what has been actually written.

Students are often imbued with a sense of self worth when they notice that the ideas in their penbook letters are regarded seriously and genuinely by their teacher. In writing a response to the student's letter, a teacher seeks to understand what the student is trying to say and composes a validating response. Students are encouraged to take risks with language and mechanical errors are not mentioned.

When teachers read student penbook letters about stories through an autobiographic or hermeneutic lens, they look for the personal and the unique. Teachers know that stories tend to invite us to a reflective search for significance. Stories also have the power to transform: we may be touched, stirred, and moved by a story.

For example, Sara, a grade nine student, reflects on many ideas generated from reading J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1991). She uses such expressions as "enlightened," "touched me," "insight," and "communicate for the first time." This story does seem to invite Sydney to search for personal meaning.

> *I recently read The Catcher in the Rye on recommendation of a friend. This book was enlightening in a way I rarely get to enjoy.*
> *The main character, Holden gives the first impression of a teenage boy who doesn't really give a care as well as being rude in the most*

> *uninteresting way. Can first impressions be deceiving? Holden cares more than most people care throughout their entire lives.*
>
> *"She was depressing. Her green dress hanging in the closet and all. Besides, I don't think I could ever do it with someone that sits in a stupid movie all day long."*
>
> *In this section of the book, Holden has a hooker in his hotel room with him. I found it interesting that a sixteen year old boy was thinking more about the girl's emotions and life than about his own sexual urges. Beyond, way beyond the maturity of most teenaged boys. Even more refreshing was the fact that he was turned off by the personality of the girl to the point he would give up sex. Too many people are thinking on a sexual basis, when the only way to be happy is to connect in social, emotional, and intellectual ways. The fact that this character realized that relationships must be mental as well as physical is one of the reasons this book really touched me.*
>
> *"But what I mean is, lots of time you don't know what interests you most till you start talking about something that doesn't interest you most."*
>
> *This quote was great! It's so true; the bad things in life really make us appreciate the amazing things. The dull, repetitive personalities we see everyday only teach us to embrace the people with enough insight to touch us. Everyday I become more aware as I realize the kind of people I want in my life.*
>
> *However, above and beyond these smaller, individual messages is the theme of this book. Our society is fake. We work our entire lives to impress others. All we ever strive for is popularity. The sooner a person respects and enjoys herself, the sooner she can reach out and really communicate for the first time.*

Of course, a teacher also needs to read student letters pedagogically. In knowing a particular student, a teacher understands some of what is important for this student to read in the response she receives from her teacher. Certainly, the teacher can always find something positive to write to recognize the student--

whether that recognition takes the form of noting insights, good description or summary, or even an improvement in elaboration of ideas in the letter. But the response can provide much more than this. Once a teacher becomes familiar with qualitative research approaches, it may also be very helpful to ascertain which research approach may yield understandings that enable the teacher to respond in an even more thoughtful manner.

I intentionally begin the school year with an activity that features personal letter writing. My purpose is to raise my students' awareness of the characteristics of the personal letter so that later when writing their own penbook letters they become more conscious of how letters may reveal much about us.

I create five different letters of welcome to language arts which develop along the lines of these salutations: Dearest Boys and Girls, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen, Listen up Jerkface, and Chill out Guys. The students assume that they are receiving a genuine letter of welcome from me, their teacher. However, they open the envelope on their desk and soon discover that their letter is not the same as their neighbor's.

I then ask for reactions. As students read the letters aloud and make comments, I record key words and phrases on the board. Students then discuss the style of the letter as well as the content to determine the teacher's view of teaching and learning, how he/she looks at language arts and the kind of students to which the letter seems to be addressed. In the discussion that follows I also draw to the students' attention when their classmates hold differing interpretations of the same letter. I follow this process for all five letters.

Students then write down three concepts about letter writing:

I. Letters reveal a lot about the people who write them.

II. The audience (who the letter is written to) affects how the letter is written.

III. People interpret the same letter differently. We bring our own experiences and uniqueness to the process of reading and interpreting a letter.

I then distribute a real letter of welcome and ask students to see if they can discover my view of language arts and how I view them as my students. Students then write a letter telling about themselves (interests, family) and what they hope to achieve in language arts this year (goals, hopes). From these discussions I have learned that what most students hope for in a teacher is someone who listens, respects, supports, and inspires them.

Conclusion

This chapter revealed the overarching interpretive signature of this study: the pedagogical gaze. Students become quite aware that their own penbook letters reveal much about them. This then marks the beginning of the year-long and frequent epistolary exchange between the student and teacher.

Ultimately, the various literary and interpretive perspectives are the source and challenge of how to see and act pedagogically with particular students in always dynamic, contingent, and concrete situations and relations. The penbook letter helps the teacher to identify instructional concerns for future teaching of the student, but at the same time offers insights into the student's personal life and growth. The teacher must not only ask what is good for this child's future, but also the teacher must ask what is good for this child in the present, today, right now in this circumstance.

The significance of this study lies in the pedagogical aspects of relationality, intentionality and practical ethics that can be fostered through the epistolary dimension of Reading Room. The pedagogical relation is a fragile entity. Both the child and the teacher must be willing to be open and vulnerable towards each other. A genuine pedagogical relation takes time and patience to develop.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Reading does take up a considerable space of time in the language arts classroom. Teachers need to see the possible worlds or places that literature invites children to live in and through. If we do not reflect on these worlds, then what we make of a child's reading experience is a flattened and shallow interpretation when it calls for something more thoughtful and consequential. We need to realize that any reading experience should be understood in terms of its meaning and place in the total lifeworld of the child. To read means to "live a story" and to live through it in such a way that the story is indeed experienced as one's own story. Reading and writing provide for rich possibilities of becoming a self and imagining worlds. "In reading I 'unrealize myself'. Reading introduces me to imaginative variations of the ego," says Ricoeur (1987, p. 94). But writing also participates in this process of experimenting with the self. Through the Reading Room students read and write about reading in ways that permit them to experience possibilities of being and becoming and for this they need "space."

In their reading of novels students construct worlds through the words in the text that they encounter. Just as John Douglas Porteous stresses the importance "for children to fantasize, imagine, to be close to living things, to experience danger" (1990, p. 172) that can be found in the English-style adventure playground, so I suggest that students' literary experiences in reading novels may also nourish this appetite for fantasy and adventure in a vicarious way. Henry Jenkins points to the space of the adventure island archetype typically found in "boy" books. This is the space of "an isolated world far removed from domestic space or adult supervision, an untamed world for people who refuse to bow before the pressures of the civilizing process, a never-never-land where you seek your fortune" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 279). Students who write about the novels that excite their imaginations are eager to be heard. Atwell-Vassey writes that when students' narrative interpretations are ignored or dismissed, students "are likely to retreat, lose interest in the text, or defer to the teacher or secondary sources" (1998, p. 120). Teachers need to become aware of how important it is to validate the personal literary responses of their students. Of course, this form of recognition is an important part of how a teacher responds pedagogically to penbook letters she receives from her students. I have discussed a variety of interpretive perspectives and frames. Here I place some concluding remarks.

The literary theory frame

In his book, *Before Reading,* Rabinowitz explores the conventions that seem to rule the reading experience even though he does not address in a deep way what it is that makes the reading experience existentially significant for issues of identity formation. Appleyard is more interested in the actual and prereflective experience of reading as meaning making in his *Becoming a Reader* and he relies on a developmental theory of identity to explore differences in the reading experiences of children, adolescents and adults. There are implications in the works of Rabinowitz, Appleyard, and Nussbaum for identity formation in the adolescent reader. Therefore, it may be useful for teachers to develop an awareness of how, when, and where students translate conventions (in Rabinowitz's terms) into meaning and in becoming the "authorial audience." In her writings Nussbaum is especially probing of the reading experience in her philosophical examination of the aesthetic significance of the novel as a "living" form that provides for possibilities of entering imagined worlds with pedagogical consequences for identity development and personal growth.

However, it is difficult to deduce a theory of writing from theories of reading. In reviewing and discussing the pedagogical issues arising from these three theorists, it appears clear that these literary theorists are indeed primarily concerned with reading and not with writing. It is true that reading a text is sometimes conceptualized as "re-writing" the text, but the actual experience of writing too may need to be "theorized" and understood as an "interactive experience" with language, in the sense of Appleyard.

In placing the three literary theories of Rabinowitz, Appleyard, and Nussbaum side by side, it appears that the experiential and personal aspects of reading seem to be a growing theme in the successive discussion of the three authors. By way of a conclusion I want to illustrate how this increased attention for the experiential value of reading also is evident in the writings of contemporary educators. This observation should assist in articulating the main realization that I gained in developing this chapter: literary theories are primarily interested in reading as meaning making; but the pedagogical significance of writing-about-reading as meaning-making and identity formation is rarely addressed. This is somewhat peculiar since writing about reading is exactly what many of these authors actually practice. An interesting case in point is the evocative text by Sumara.

In his recent book, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters,* Dennis Sumara explores the pedagogical implications of reader response theory. I personally find his reflections fascinating since his book seems to be doing what I have tried to make pedagogically thematic in my Reading Room program where student identity formation is facilitated and encouraged through writing about reading experiences. Sumara, too, documents his personal growth, struggles and identity formation mediated through reflective writing about his reading of novels such as *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. Also, I suppose that the reader fills the role of the imagined interlocutor—a role that is filled in my classroom by myself as teacher, other students, and sometimes parents who respond to and dialogue with the student's writing about the reading.

Sumara draws upon reader response for reflecting on his own personal experiences of reading. He states that one of the purposes of his book is "to show how literary interpretation practices can transform imaginative occasions into productive insights" (Sumara, 2001, p. 5). He writes "interpretation practices function to create experiences of self-identity" (p. 8). Like Nussbaum he suggests that when the reader identifies with a character in a story, there is a kind of relationship formed with consequences for identity formation: "Identity emerges from relationships, including relationships people have with books and other communicative technologies based on language" (p. 9). The reader is affected by the character and further perceptions of the character in turn are affected by the personal biography of the reader, as argued by Appleyard. We learn through the "other." Knowing the "other" enables us to know others in a similar way. Sumara gives an example of a biographer who begins to understand her female family members better after coming to know the writer whom she is researching. Indeed, his explorations and articulations of the reading-writing process fit well with Nussbaum although Sumara does address the question of the writing experience in terms of the writer who creates a text (but not necessarily in response to a literary experience) and in turn learns about his or her personal situation.

The process of reading itself, of course, may help students to face issues of personal identity, but as a teacher I know, that in reflectively writing about reading, the pedagogical ground for encountering such processes of identity development is more likely to occur. In my view, herein lies the pedagogical power of reading-through-writing. Nussbaum too does not comment about reading mediated by writing, or the experience of writing as such, but I believe that she would be highly sympathetic to such a view. After all, as philosopher that is exactly what she herself does in her own writing. And so she can write that, "In imagining things that do not really exist, the novel, by its own account, is not being 'idle' for it is helping its readers to acknowledge their own world and to choose more reflectively in it" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 31). This idea and the views gained from literary theories by Rabinowitz, Appleyard, and Nussbaum need to push me on in developing a better understanding of the difference that writing makes in shaping the experience of reading, and in communicating in writing with others (the teacher, students, parents) about the experience of reading of literary texts.

Discourse frame

So how helpful is discourse analysis for studying and understanding how students write about their reading of stories, novels, and other fictional texts? Is the kind of knowledge that may be gained from examining penbook letters for evidence of forms of reflectivity and addressiveness, communicative practice, and self-referentiality, pedagogically valuable?

I have used discourse analysis as a tool to see how meaning in student writing is constructed. As an analytic method, discourse analysis works well to explore student writing, and it seems to yield enough insights about student reading growth that teachers could apply some of its practices in guiding them to write thoughtful, pedagogic responses. Discourse analysis of the student texts points at how students see themselves and others through identification with characters in story events in *The Outsiders*.

Appraising student letters on the basis of plot summary, commentary, or criticism may be helpful for teachers in identifying how students are reading. Student letters that demonstrate reflective interpretation of stories could be used as exemplars in classroom discussions to show students how to move from simple summarizing to more reflective writing in the form of commentaries.

Through analyzing the ten student letters, I am cognizant of students giving discursive accounts of the addressive nature of their reading. A teacher who can recognize writing that shows the communicative practices of addressive reflection or linguistic intensification encourages students to continue to identify and write about words, phrases, figurative language, and literary passages that exude strong appeal. To appreciate language and writing styles of good authors has long been considered important learning outcomes in many language arts curricula. But writing about language has more significance than realizing its poetic trope. The student uncovers meaning in the text that is experienced strongly.

In a classroom where reading is at the heart of the language arts program, students enjoy communicating with others about the worlds that they encounter in the books that they read. Students are curious about their friends' and teacher's opinions about the letters that they write. A reader response program like Reading Room enables students to engage in written conversations. The pleasure of writing contributes to the phatic significance of anticipating the responses from classmates or their teacher. A teacher quickly realizes that a reading class that functions as a small community is a class where students actually read and value it. When students use directive utterances in their letters, they are engaged with reading in such a way that they want to draw their audience's attention to an important aspect of the book or the reading act itself. Adopting an analytic method like discourse analysis can make a genuine difference in the teacher becoming more attuned to reading and writing practices of their students. There is a place in language arts and reading programs for discourse analysis.

The (auto)biographic frame

I learned from (auto)biographical narrative that the greatest pedagogical challenge is always to keep in view the uniqueness of each child. The teacher must resist the ever-tempting inclination that is built into educational institutions, programs, discourses, and practices of reducing the "who" of the child to the "what." The technocratic and outcomes oriented education system is geared in such a way that teachers are primarily concerned and interested in "what" a student is or "what" a student can do: high or low achiever at math, reliable with homework, well- or ill-behaved, etc. The present day emphasis on testing and outcomes prevents us from seeing the "who," the unique student himself or herself.

Of course, this is not only true for pedagogical relations; it is true for all human beings that the "who" can never be reduced to the "what" of a person. For example, asking "How are you?" is less a query about the state of the other person's being than a showing that we acknowledge or care for the "who" of the other person. One can only really ask "how" a person is when we know "who" a person is. This focus on the unique, I feel, is a most relevant aspect of (auto)biographic theory or philosophy.

The hermeneutic frame

If hermeneutics offers indeed a variety of interpretive perspectives and guiding questions or methods, then how should one justify any particular interpretive inquiry? Depending upon the hermeneutic perspective that one adopts, there are many different ways to interpret student texts about reading novels. For example, in orienting interpretively to a student's text, I can select the perspective of the writer (student), the perspective of the teacher, the perspective of an adolescent who lives in the age where stereotypes are rampant, or the perspective of the literary text (the letter) itself, regardless of the identity of the author (the student).

I have come to the view that my interest in the student's writing is first of all pedagogical (rather than hermeneutic in a philosophical sense) and this gives me license to adopt any appropriate form of interpretive inquiry. Or better, the student writing may suggest an interpretive approach that may be helpful in terms of my understanding of the letter as text, of the student (as author but also as a growing person), and of my possible pedagogical responses that may be appropriate with regards to this particular text and this student.

In order to arrive at an appropriate way of responding to a student and his or her penbook letter, I borrow interpretive (hermeneutical) possibilities for making sense. Gadamer says that by asking a question we place "what is questioned in a particular perspective" (1975, p. 362). In interpreting a student letter, I ask these questions:

1. What is the perspective of the writer (the student) who has particular characteristics and identity?
2. What is the perspective of the teacher who tries to have a larger view of the student and who tries to understand the text in terms of the student's formative experiences?

In writing about novels, students often attempt to clarify and make sense of the fictional stories that they encounter and in doing so they make sense *with* their own lives and they make sense of the story *of* their own lives. Ricoeur says, "Literature gives a configuration to what was already a figure in human action" (Ricoeur in Wood, 1991, p. 169). Literature can be understood through life, and life can be understood through literature. Reading certain kinds of stories seems to have an awakening power for students. I agree with Charles Sarland who writes that "popular fiction constructs generalities, values, and views of relationships which the young can use in order to begin to understand the world and their place in it" (1991, p. 67). In preparing to respond thoughtfully to student letters about reading novels, the teacher needs to be able to spot instances of the student making personal meaning or seeking clarification of his or her beliefs and values while at the same time keeping the larger pedagogical perspective in mind.

The critical frame

I have tried to articulate briefly my understanding of critical and postcolonial thought; and I have tried to relate Willinsky's postcolonial perspective to the critical framework of a hermeneutics of suspicion. This seems helpful, because from this broader critical hermeneutic I could derive some methodological principles that in turn may help with raising guiding interpretive questions in the examination of student penbook letters about their reading of literature (novels and stories).

I feel that this (re-)reading of the letters was quite revealing for myself as teacher-respondent to these letters. And so the relevance of Willinsky's hermeneutics of suspicion in the task of reinterpreting the student writings made it possible to discover openings and opportunities for new insights and different understandings from a more routine language arts teacher point of view. Basically a more critical approach is made possible by the application of a postcolonial hermeneutic.

Indeed, a more radical and committed critical stance is necessary. But what kind and what degree of critical reflection is reasonable to expect of a junior high school student with reference to, for example, a book such as *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break* or *Nightjohn*? What teaching could produce a genuine distancing in the sense of Ricoeur? Could a student like Kevin come to understand the irony that Nightjohn aimed to liberate his people through the linguistic tool of imperialist rationality? It means that the black people will be learning how to read and write the language of their masters—the language that names them and traps them into racist categories and distorted self-identities. How could a teacher bring Kevin to consider the ambiguous role of something so highly valued in our Western culture as "literacy education?" Perhaps the historical and inherited sensibility of black identity and the slavery experience are so deeply embodied and embedded in black reality that they cannot really be captured even in novelistic discourse—but, from a postcolonial point of view, they may be expressed through other means that belong to the blacks themselves: styles, gestures, ways of acting, talking, rapping, and different embodied modalities of community and gender relations. How do we know where and what dimensions of historical and contemporary black experience and black self-identity are internalized pathologies of imperialist powers? And what provides white authors, teachers and students the right and righteousness to claim to know how one should understand the other?

These are important questions to raise and ponder, but I believe they should not lead to complacency or prevent educators from trying to select culturally appropriate books for school libraries and classrooms. Nor should these questions thwart teachers from encouraging their students to rethink imperialist ideological habits in their writing about novels that they read. In today's classrooms, students are increasingly acquainted with the "tools" of critical thinking and are encouraged to step back from a text in order to interpret what is embedded in linguistic elements. Many schools have formulated and adopted governing mission statements that contain references to student learning critical reflection with responsible action in their own personal and political lives. So there are legitimating frameworks for justifying and introducing a more critical and postcolonial perspective into language arts. Of course, five hundred years of imperialistic influence is not undone or repaired easily or quickly. However, I am encouraged by the numbers of beginning teachers who are entering the teaching profession and show increasing critical mindedness. In trying to "make a difference" in the lives of their students, these teachers may endeavor to select and present literature that mobilizes their students to critically reflect on imperialist and postcolonial cultural influences.

The pedagogical priority

It may seem appropriate to treat the pedagogical perspective as just another frame. However, I consider pedagogy to be at the very heart of teaching—it animates every other perspective by giving it context, purpose, meaning, and significance.

It is important to be aware that every student is unique and that, therefore, it is unwise to generalize too strongly about the role of any single interpretive perspective in the practice of Reading Room. No doubt, novels, stories, poetry and other media such as film have complex effects on student literary experiences and the possibility for students to develop as mature readers. It seems important that teachers can be tolerant of less favored readings that their students enjoy, but show interest in these books and related media by asking questions and listening carefully to what students think and feel about them. A teacher who develops sensitivities of a text's proximity to the lives of his or her students may better understand the significance of literary experience and its narrative relationship to identity development. No doubt there is value for students to become more flexible in their reading selections, but more important is the recognition of an individual student's readiness for change and accommodation of a new genre at a particular time in space. This is part of the pedagogy that values children's lived realities.

Conclusion

This chapter reviews the itineraries of the interpretive perspectives and processes used in the study. But it points also to the priority position that pedagogy takes in the employment of any interpretive frame in the tasks of teaching. Indeed, this study is offered as an exploration into the pedagogical significance of the epistolatory aspects of writing to read and reading to write. The media of novels, stories and other narratives provoke students to engage in self-reflection. And the penbook letter is the sensitive medium for acquiring pedagogical insights into students' lives. So the pedagogical task of the teacher is to mediate these mediations. Knowledge of literary theories and the interpretive perspectives of discourse analysis, (auto)biography and narrative, hermeneutics, and critical theory assists in the emergence of thoughtful understandings of how students are reading and responding to the text.

What the teacher may learn in the textual space of the penbook should serve to respond pedagogically to the student in an epistolatory manner. The teacher writes back in the same penbook: deepening the reflective writing of the student, giving advice for further reading, suggesting different ways of looking at fictional material, strengthening a student's sense of self, raising questions for further reflections, and so forth. As well, the insights that the teacher may learn from the penbook exchange will serve to guide the teacher's tactful actions (with respect to particular students) in other classroom situations and language arts lessons. But the pedagogical reality of the concrete classroom is always contingent, asking teachers to act appropriately in ever-changing situations. Engaging students in worthwhile acts of reading and writing about reading—within the context of an approach such as Reading Room—are complex as well as promising practices for the development of pedagogical relations.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Appendix 1

Goal Activities

Name: ________________________

Select three activities from the list. Work on a first draft on loose leaf; then, write or type your final draft in place of a penbook letter. You will need to organize your time in order to submit the letter on the first or second day of a Reading Room cycle. Glue or staple the goal activity into your penbook. You may share this piece of writing with a classmate, parent, or your teacher. Each goal activity takes the place of a regular letter.

- Write a poem about your book (minimum 20 lines).
- Write a letter to one of the characters in your book.
- Transfer a major character into an animal that fits his or her personality. Write a letter to the character explaining why you selected that animal.
- Write an essay explaining why you would or would not like to live in the world portrayed in your book. (minimum – 500 words)
- From the yellow pages of a phone book, select and list businesses (minimum four) that you think the main character would be interested in. Write a paragraph for each of the businesses that you have chosen explaining why the business would interest the character.
- Write a business letter (use proper format) to the publisher of the book requesting copies of the novel. Include a description of the novel and an explanation of why the copies are needed.
- Write a TV script for one long scene or chapter of your book.
- Write an essay explaining how your book could be made into a movie. Include references to setting, plot, casting choices, props, costume design, etc. (minimum – 500 words)

- Write an essay comparing your book to another book that you have read. (minimum – 500 words)
- Imagine that you are the author of this book. In an essay, tell about your life and how the book relates to experiences you have had. Your essay may be entirely fictitious or based on knowledge you have about the author. (minimum – 500 words)
- Make up a minimum of ten interview questions (with answers) for the author of your book.
- Write a letter to the author. Include why you like or dislike the book, possible suggestions for change, questions to clarify ideas encountered while reading the book, and any other concerns you might have.

Appendix 2

Reading Survey

Name________________________________ Date _________________

1. If you had to guess . . .

How many books would you say you own?

____

How many books would you say there are in your house?

____

How many novels would you say you have read in the last 12 months?

____

2. How did you learn to read?

____

____

3. Why do you think that people read?

____

____

4. What does someone have to do in order to be a good reader?

____

____

5. How does a teacher decide which students are good readers?

6. What kind of books do you like to read?

7. How do you decide which books you will read?

8. Have you ever re-read a book? ________________ If so can you name it / them here?

9. Do you ever read novels at home for pleasure? ________ If so, how often do you read

at home (for pleasure)?

10. Who are your favorite authors? (List as many as you would like.)

11. Do you like to have your teacher read to you? _____________ If so, is there anything special you would like to hear?

12. In general, how do you feel about reading?

____

Appendix 3

Student Letter Excerpts about The Outsider

Letter 1

I have just started reading a new author which you recommended to me earlier this year—S.E. Hinton. The result: I found *The Outsiders* *thrilling, wonderful, and very touching.*

The Outsiders *is a novel based on a group of teenage boys, together in a gang, living on the side of town known for roughness. They smoke, steal, get in trouble with the law, and start fights among themselves, and with the social upper class gang, known as the Socs. They are named the "Greasers," a name that they are not proud of, a name that whenever heard, they cringe. For they know it refers to them, the hoods, the Socs say, the troublemakers of the town. They are all tough and rough, and within a blink of an eye, can whip out their switchblades from their back pockets.*

The story revolves around a young member of the gang. Ponyboy is a fourteen year old trying to deal with his parents' deaths and life at home with his strict, unloving oldest brother, Darry. Ponyboy maintains a "tough" image yet beneath his bad exterior there is a young boy desperately wanting to continue his education for a better life.

Ponyboy's best friend, Johnny, too has problems in his life. Johnny, growing up in an abusive family, lives his life in terror after a brutal assault by drunk Socs. The rings left the life long scars; the assault left fear in his heart.

When Ponyboy experiences trouble at home with Darry, he along with Johnny run away from home, hoping to find refuge in the park. Instead they find drunk and dangerous Socs roaming the area, in search of any Greasers to beat up. A Soc nearly drowns Ponyboy, and Johnny, in self-defense and half-crazed fear stabs the guy. The two young boys are scared and very confused. They find themselves turning to a fellow gang member, Dally, who has clashed with the law more than once. They *escape the law, yet do not escape their won inner code of ethics. Now realizing that they have committed a very serious crime, murder, they decide to turn themselves in. On their way home, they encounter a burning church with children trapped inside. Ponyboy realizes that the blaze might have been his fault, and he along with Johnny plunge into the church. The children are brought out safely, yet Johnny returns very seriously injured. He is in critical condition, and may be dying.*

"Juvenile Delinquents Turn Heroes" newspaper headlines scream. The gang now realizes that Johnny was a big part of them and each member is trying to cope with his injury. Scared and angry they take out their revenge on the Socs, with every swing thinking of Johnny. They win the rumble, but have not achieved anything. Ponyboy arrives at the hospital, but Johnny is dying. Breathing his last breath, Johnny says that it's not worth it. Johnny dies. So does a part of the gang.

I found this book very well written, and I am amazed at the amount of skill and experience portrayed in the words of a sixteen year old writer. This book touched me—how the gang cared so deeply for each other. Beneath their tough image there was a sensitive, caring, able to love part in all of them. It was Johnny's friends who cared for him, watched him hurt, comforted him, looked out for him, and at his deathbed held his hand.

Letter 2

Can you believe it? S.E. Hinton was only 16 when she wrote The Outsiders! It was an incredible book. The way Susan Hinton describes "Greasers" or slum kids helped me realize how they look at life and the way they are always there for each other. Although the "rich kids" or Socs are different, each group has its similarities. As it said in the book, "We each see sunrises and their beauty, even if it is from a different place." Hinton describes each character's personality so well that I feel I know them. I feel that is required if you are to like a book. Hinton can make you feel each character's pain and their love for each other.

I also like the title, The Outsiders, because it describes how they feel even if they are used to their own lifestyle. To others they would always be outsiders of society. They don't have much in terms of possessions, but they have each other. One of the boys, Johnny, kills a Soc because he was killing his best friend Ponyboy. They hide out, but after a fire nearly kills them, they give themselves up. Johnny dies, and they all suffer greatly. Through this book Hinton tries to tell us that all humans feel and respond the same—each feels the guilt of killing, the sorrow of death, or the joy of achievement. But, until society realizes this, someone will always be cast out—an outsider.

Letter 3

Hey, I haven't yet decided what book I will read next, but I'm thinking it will be a classic. I want to read a book about stalkers because then I could learn more about the right techniques. Anyways, so, I just read the book called The Outsiders. I know you have read it, because you like guys with long hair (lower standards).

It is a really good book because it shows people like us who have a high standard of living what it is like to be poor. Because we are so close to living in a Utopian society, we really don't know how bad life can be. We worry about what movie we are going to see next weekend, and they worry about where they are going to sleep, eat, and if they are going to die from a rumble tomorrow.

It makes me angry to know that we worry about the stupidest things in the world when we really don't have a reason to. Anyways, Slampers, gotta jet. Peace out g-Dogg!!!

Letter 4

Even though I am reading a book right now called Heart of a Champion by Carl Deuker, I am going to write a letter about the book that I just finished since I am not far enough in my new book to write a letter about it. Also, I *want to write a letter to discuss the main character and his emotions in the story and how they relate to his identity and behavior.*

The story is about a gang called the Greasers and a rival gang called the Socs. The main characters are Ponyboy and Johnny. There are also many other big characters in the story such as Darry (Ponyboy's brother), Sodapop (Ponyboy's other brother) and other members of the gang. The way that most people would view these characters if they saw them would be that they are tough, rough, and don't care about anything. But that's not true. Deep down inside Ponyboy feels sadness because of his parents' deaths and that his older brother, Darry, has to raise him. Darry is never really that nice to Ponyboy and is always telling him what to do. But one night when Darry and Ponyboy get in an argument Darry hits him and Ponyboy runs away with his best friend Johnny.

This is where the conflict in the story begins. Ponyboy and Johnny come across the Socs and through some conflict Johnny kills one of the Socs. This forces them to run away out of the city and hide in the country. This is where another part of Ponyboy's heart plays a role. He and Johnny are forced to stick together. You may ask what holds them together. FRIENDSHIP. Ponyboy has that part of him in him that is able to be there for someone through friendship. He could just leave Johnny because he doesn't want to get involved with the situation, but rather he decides to be there for him. In this time, he also goes through fear—that of knowing that they are murderers. Anyone would think that nothing would scare a gangster, but things do. And no matter what, everyone has emotions even if they look tough or are rough.

Ponyboy goes through many hard times in this story, as well as at the end when Johnny dies. He may be rough and tough, but he still has feelings.

The reasons why I like this story are because it shows that people have feelings and to always recognize this no matter what their appearance, personality, or behavior are like. Also, this story deals with a one of a kind friendship that can last through anything.

Letter 5

The Outsiders is a very different book and I would suggest that you read it. It has a good theme. It takes your whole life to make a reputation but one action can change it. In this book the Greasers, like White people in the hood, are looked at as being gross, dirty, and tough guys. Ponyboy (that's his actual name) breaks this stereotype but nobody actually recognizes his differences. I can see how someone would join a gang because one would always feel needed/wanted and one's identity would be picked by someone else.

Ponyboy's older brothers are also part of the Greasers, and I'm sure that was the biggest influence on his joining the gang. I know I look up to my brother and sister, and if asked to go out with them to a party or even just to "chill" I would say yes.

Although Ponyboy is an excellent character, I would have to say Dally and Sodapop are my favorite characters. Dally pretends that he doesn't care, but it is obvious that he loves his fellow gang members. I guess I like him because that is what my brother is like. He's wild but always takes the "kick" for his friends. I really respect that in anyone.

Sodapop is supposedly a looker so how could I not love his character. The only thing is that he is the perfect older brother, and I don't think that exists. He always allows Ponyboy to hang with him and never gets angry at him. Perhaps S.E. Hinton developed Sodapop because she wanted a brother like that and maybe if he was in a book he would become more real.

Let me know what you think. 1-888-HOT-STUFF

Luv always

Letter 6

The theme of this book is similar to the cliche, "Don't judge a book by its cover." I feel this way because the book was about Ponyboy meeting and realizing that the Socs weren't all that bad. For example, when the Socs show up at the Tasty Freeze, Randy Anderson is one of them. He is the best friend of Bob, the Soc that Johnny killed. He asks to speak to

Ponyboy. Ponyboy, at this point, is seething with hatred for that particular group of Socs. He blames them for Bob's death and for Johnny dying. He feels that it is their fault that he and Sodapop might get put in a boy's home. His opinion of the Socs right now is that they are stuck up, evil people. This is understandable since the Socs are so nasty and have caused his gang so much pain. However, Ponyboy agrees to speak to Randy.

Randy leads Ponyboy to his car where they sit in the front seats. Randy asks why Ponyboy saved those kids from the burning church. Ponyboy coolly says, "I don't know. Maybe I felt like playing hero." I think that Ponyboy is a little rude here because his answer is so cool and heartless. It makes him sound like he doesn't care about the kids in the burning church, and like he just felt like saving them. I know that this is not true because as soon as Ponyboy hears the kids yelling inside the church, he takes off at a dead run for the church. Also, he isn't scared. He keeps repeating to himself, "Why aren't I scared? I should be scared, so why aren't I?" I think he is so worried about the kids getting out safely that he isn't scared about what might happen to him. As well, I know he cares because he checks to make sure the kids land safely after he drops them out of the window. If he didn't care, he wouldn't have done anything for those kids.

Randy tells Ponyboy that he himself wouldn't have saved those kids. Ponyboy says, "You might have." Then, Randy replies, "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. I would never have believed a Greaser could pull something like that." Ponyboy at this point, makes a very interesting statement. He says, "Greaser didn't have anything to do with it. My buddy over there wouldn't have done it. Maybe you would have done the same thing, maybe a friend of yours wouldn't have. It's the individual." I find this statement so interesting because it is true. It doesn't matter what people think you are and how you act. The only thing that matters is what you think you are and how you think you act.

For example, in this case, Randy thinks that Greasers are all the same and don't care about anybody. Ponyboy proves him wrong by saving those *kids. Ponyboy, on hearing those kids scream inside the church, didn't think, "Those kids need help but I'm a Greaser and Greasers don't do this type of thing." Instead he goes with what he wants to do and what he knows is right.*

I am proud of Ponyboy for making this statement because I think it taught Randy that Ponyboy didn't really buy into this whole "reputation" or "image" thing. I feel this way because of Randy's next comment. Randy says, "I'm not going to show at the rumble tonight." I think he feels comfortable saying this to Ponyboy because he realizes that Ponyboy wouldn't act all shocked and appalled at this statement. He would just accept it. I feel that this is where Ponyboy finally begins to realize that Randy isn't who he had thought he was because Ponyboy looks at Randy and thinks to himself, "Cherry said Socs were too cool to feel anything. Randy is supposed to be too cool to feel anything, and yet there is pain in his eyes." I think this really surprised Ponyboy because Randy is supposed to be tough, and yet here he is, helpless. Ponyboy is surprised to learn that Randy belongs to a group he hates, yet, Randy is in a lot of trouble himself. Randy then continues to say that he is sick of fighting and rumbles. He says that people get hurt and killed in rumbles and that nobody wins. He won't fight because it won't do any good. This really made me respect Randy because it's true. I really believe that there is no winner in fighting. The person who loses is all beaten up. The person who wins lives in threat of being attacked by the loser's friends. Who wins in that type of situation? Nobody. So, I am really proud of Randy for doing the right thing. Also, I think Ponyboy is really impressed by this statement because it is intelligent, insightful, and right. S.E. Hinton does a wonderful job of solidifying Ponyboy's change of heart about the Socs by what happens when Ponyboy comes out of Randy's car. Two Bit says, "What'd Mr. Super Soc have to say?" Ponyboy replies, "He ain't a soc, he's just a guy." I loved this because right there you know Ponyboy feels different about Socs. Then, Hinton goes even further to say what Ponyboy is thinking. He thinks to himself. "Socs were just guys after all. Things were rough all over, but it was better that way. That way you *could tell the other guy was human too." This is the ultimate proof that Ponyboy has a different opinion about the Socs. He now realizes that Socs are just people who have problems too. He now knows that Socs aren't rich, snotty people who like to beat up on Greasers. Ponyboy knows they are just guys, the same as him.*

I think this is a great book to read because it gets its message (Don't judge a book by its cover.) across so clearly. I think this is an important message because in our society we are so quick to judge people by rumors we hear and by their appearance. We don't take the time to get to know people and find out who they are before we decide if the person is someone we can get along with. I think that is why we have so many loners in our society. We judge too quickly. This book has an important message for society that we should take to heart.

Thanks for reading my letter. I'm sorry it's so long. I hope you like it.

Letter 7

I chose this quote from The Outsiders. "He was jerked half around by the impact of the bullets then slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face."

I chose this quote because it makes me realize that someone who has as many problems as Dally would just leave them with someone else to deal with. Instead of solving all of his own problems, he pushes them aside which leads to more and more problems.

In the quote, it says that "he slowly crumpled with a look of triumph on his face." I think Dally has this "look of triumph" because he knows he has finally beaten the cops. He has almost gotten away with the crime he committed, but at the last minute he makes everything worse for himself. He points an unloaded gun at the cops, which forces them to fire at him. Dally commits suicide by pointing that gun at the cops. I think that he wants it all to end this way.

Dally knows he had helped his friends to the point that he couldn't help anymore. His best friend Johnny is dead, and I think that he tries to blame *it on himself. Dally knows that when he is dead, he won't have to worry about anything anymore, but what I don't think he knows is that he is making everything worse for all of his friends. He leaves all of his problems for them to deal with, let alone the fact that he is gone.*

Letter 8

Right now I am reading The Outsiders. The book is about two gangs in a small city who are always rivals. The two gangs are the Socs and the Greasers. The Greasers are the less fortunate, more rowdy gang that lives on the East side. The Socs are the rich, Greaser jumping (gang fights) stuck-ups. The Greasers got their nickname from some of the boys in their gang who have greasy hair. There are a group of Greasers that always are together. The group "members" are Johnny, Dally, Two-bit, Sodapop, Ponyboy, and Darry. Johnny is the youngest. One day Johnny was saving Ponyboy from drowning (the Socs pushed his head into a fountain) and little Johnny stabbed a Soc and killed him. Johnny and Ponyboy run out of the city to an abandoned church (after taking a one hour train ride). They stay at the church because they don't want to get caught.

I really find this book interesting. Both of the gangs are totally different and when the Greasers get jumped, I almost want to be there helping them. The characters seem so close to you that it makes you feel like they are real. The way the author writes makes you feel like you are there, experiencing the problems the gang has and fighting the fights.

My favorite character is Sodapop. The author says he is a charming, sensitive, understanding person. He dropped out of high school so he could pay for Ponyboy's education. I think that he must always put other people before himself—because everyone loves him.

I will continue reading this book to the last page! I have to say it is one of the best books I have ever read and I highly recommend reading it.

Letter 9

I am reading the book The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton. It is about a gang of poor teenagers who live their lives in fear of being killed despite the fact they're as young as 14. The main character is Ponyboy. He gets jumped by a rival gang and is hurt really badly so now the two gangs are talking back to each other which I believe will lead to a conflict that will cause serious injury.

Here is a quote from The Outsiders. "Dally had seen people killed on the streets of New York, so why did he look so sick now?" This refers to Johnny's beating.

I feel that in this quote the author is trying to explain that when you're friends with someone and you care about them emotions rise. So when Dally's friend Johnny gets beaten up, he feels sick to his stomach because he knows and cares about Johnny. Unlike in New York where he sees just another person whom he didn't know or care about get killed, he feels for the deceased a little bit, but not as much as when his friend Johnny died. This quote applies to me in the same yet a little less extreme way. When I play hockey and someone gets injured on the other team, I don't really care as much as when one of my teammates/friends gets hurt. Then I feel that bad and hope that my teammate will be okay after a few stitches or a cast. I feel that this quote is very universal and can be used in many different situations.

Letter 10

I'm now finished reading The Outsiders and feel it is probably one of the best books I have ever read. I think it is way better than Jurassic Park which before I thought was excellent. The ending of this book was very dramatic and powerful. By the time you get to the ending you feel like you know everyone in the book. I guess you feel this way because the author gives many examples of the person's everyday life and that gives you f feel for that person.

I thought Susan Hinton described the characters well and when she gave us an example of what that person did, it gave more of a visual mental picture. I think Johnny is the calm, cool type. He was beaten by his father as a kid and I think that made him more aware of other people's feelings. Because his father beat him, he realizes how it feels to have these things done to you and so he doesn't do them to anybody else. Dally, on the other hand, doesn't care about other people and would beat them for fun. I guess that's because he has grown up without a family and has lived on the streets alone. Ponyboy is in the middle of the two.

The mood in the story took a dramatic change. At the beginning of the book, it was sort of a happy go lucky type mood. Even though Ponyboy got jumped at the beginning you still felt like it was a happy book. Then when Johnny killed that Soc the mood changed drastically. It went from a happy to a tense mood. It stayed the same until about the part when Johnny died. Then the mood went to a sad mood. And when Dally died it carried the sadness deeper.

This remarkable novel gives a moving, credible view of gang members from the inside. It also shows their loyalty to each other, their sensitivity under the crusts, and their understanding of themselves and society. This books talks about the harsh reality of living on the streets with a family and without one. We help a lot of people in the third world countries but I think a lot of help is needed in our own country also. This book really hits hard and lays out a message at the end of it when the most drastic change in the novel occurs. If you give your kids a hard time, they might run away or do something crazy. You have to be kind to them.

Student letter 4

To Life (Ruth Minsky Sender)

I am nearly finished a very emotional, true novel called To Life, by Ruth Minsky Sender, a well-known Holocaust survivor. It is the sequel to her book The Cage.

So to speak, Ruth or Riva, left her first book at the liberation by Russia from the concentration camps. This book begins after the Russians free the dehydrated women from a labor camp in Germany. Finding their way back to Todz, Poland, the truth of the tragedies in the Second World War is evident. The Poles are engulfed with hatred for the surviving Jews, leaving them once more with no homes, still locked in a "cage" of no help.

Riva travels home with three friends, finding no traces of her lost family. She remembers often the happy times with her family, and the moments when they were forever separated.

This book is written in first person, allowing me to really feel for Riva, and wonder how I could seriously live through the things Riva and her Jewish race had to in order to survive. Throughout the whole novel, she relies on a well worn hopeful phrase her mother swore by, "As long as there is life, there is hope." She gathers strength from these words, and makes it through the long hardship of simply finding somewhere to belong. "We are free, but we are still trapped" is another phrase used. The gates of her jail were finally unlocked, but all the doors were closed, bolted. There was nowhere for her to belong.

Finding love and a common strength from her new husband, Moniek and her family that she finally found (two sisters and a brother fled to Russia in 1939), Riva lives in numerous displaced persons' camps in Germany waiting to start life anew in America.

This story is really meant to show the laid-back, easygoing world never returned to normal after the Holocaust for the scarred survivors. It is a story of starting from the ashes of a devastating time and building new hope and lives.

There are an obvious variety of moods presented in the story as well. Joy is expressed at the birth of new life, Riva's children. Nervous excitement of an unknown new home in America, all shadowed by the stabbing pain of the war, and the losses endured. I admire Riva for always having the hope to move on, dreaming of better days. Had I been a victim of the Holocaust, I'm sure my outlook on the future would be much more limited and hopeless. I think the will to love and see changes is simply what allowed many survivors to survive and write their legends and pain onto paper for all of us to see and understand. Many more people have kept silent, maybe still afraid of the vicious consequence of speaking.

This kind of book can't be written by people who haven't seen the horrors; they can't express the emotion that this book and others can. That's why I love Holocaust stories with so much passion, so to speak, because they are true, and someone's innermost nightmares and secrets are exposed. This is what makes a book worth reading to me. The Holocaust is a huge part of the past that we can't ignore, and I love people such as Ruth Minsky Sender for letting the spoiled kids of this generation know how lucky we are.

Student letter 5

The Education of Little Tree (Forrest Carter)

I have finished reading the novel, The Education of Little Tree, by Forrest Carter. I enjoyed reading this story; however, I didn't find it as exciting as I did other books.

This book centers on Little Tree, a small Indian boy who lived with his grandparents in the mountains. I left off in my last letter when I was halfway through the book, when Little Tree's calf had died. After that incident, Little

Tree began to learn more and more because, as you can probably infer, this novel focuses on Little Tree's education and experiences as he grows older. It is through his experiences that he learns more about many of life's lessons and about the nature of man.

Once, when Little Tree and grandfather were fishing, he (Little Tree) was about to be bitten by a rattlesnake when his grandfather put his hand in front of Little Tree to protect him. The rattlesnake bit Granpa's hand and Granpa was poisoned. He would have died, but Granma knew how to treat the bite. From this, Little Tree realized how strong granmpa's love for him was, and also the love between his grandparents. The Cherokee called this love "kinship." They believed that love and understanding were the same thing. I agree with this because you can't love anyone without understanding them. In this book, Granma and Granpa had an understanding. They always knew what was right and how each other felt. They believed that this was essential for their love.

Later on, the author introduced Willow John. He was one of my favorite characters. An old, Cherokee man, he would attend church with Little Tree and his grandparents. He had always been very sad, that was, until he met Little Tree. Once in church, Little Tree put a bullfrog in his pocket. The Cherokee believed that when you gave someone a gift, you didn't present it to him—you put it where he would find it. Anyways, the bullfrog kept on croaking through mass, and, for once in a long time, Willow John laughed. He had been sad before because he had seen how all the Indians had been killed in the Nations. I think he was sad because he had lost hope that someday, the Cherokee and the Indians would live in happiness and peace, free from the threats of the whites to take over their land. From one perspective, I think this could be seen as Willow John's dream. It kept him hopeful. However, when he saw how badly Indians were mistreated in the Nations, he began to doubt his dream would ever come true and became dead in a sense. He was physically still alive, but spiritually dead. In the book, it stated, "his eyes were black, open wounds; not angry wounds, but dead wounds that lay bare, without life." However, I believed that his *attitude towards life changed after the incident with the bullfrog. I think this helped him realize that there was still beauty in life and perhaps even helped him to believe there still was hope in his dream. This revived Willow John and aided him in becoming happier and more lively.*

Anyways, another incident that happened was that Little Tree was sent to an orphanage. Here, he communicated to his grandparents through the Dog Star; they would all look at the Dog Star and know they were all there. I think that this helped Little Tree remember who he was—it helped him keep his identity. He was the only Indian in the orphanage, and was most often discriminated against and picked on by others, including the teacher and principal. Through the dog star (Sirius), he remembered Granma, Granpa, Willow John, all his dogs, his cabin, and the mountains. I think that this helped him identify himself because in the orphanage, he was different from the others and probably even felt out of place. I can also relate to this in my personal life; I have felt sometimes out of place…(Oh, Little Tree did return home after a few months there.)

Nearer to the end, Little Tree began to experience more and more deaths. First, Mr. Wine, a good friend who was a traveler and a type of deliverer of goods, died. I found his death somewhat strange in a way. He had tagged all he had owned, telling who to give it to and/or where to send it. He even tagged his own body. I thought this was a bit strange. But, as I think about it more and more, I guess it wasn't a bad idea. I suppose he had somehow known he was going to die. Soon after this, Willow John died. Right before he died, he sang a "passing song" to tell the spirits that he was coming. Later on, Granpa and Granma began doing everything with Little Tree. I think this was because they knew they (grandparents) were going to die soon, and they didn't want to waste any time without Little Tree. In other words, I believe they were living life to its fullest. The most tragic death (I think) and the one which affected me most was Granpa's death. He had always loved watching the sunrise from the top of the mountain. However, once while climbing there with Little Tree and Granma, he slipped and fell. He never got up. I think this was the most tragic death because this one *affected Little Tree most. They had spent the most time together, and Granpa had taught and shared with him many things. Soon after, Granma died. After that Little Tree traveled east, away from the mountains with the remaining dogs. Little Red died while he was still traveling. Blue Boy died one day while Little Tree was working. Right then, he took Blue Boy on his horse and went to find him a mountain to be buried on. He found a large hill and buried him there. This is where the story ended.*

If it had continued, I think that Little Tree would someday return to the cabin he had grown up in, even if it was much later in his life (he was still a boy when the story left off).

This story had many subthemes and ideas. I think these were told and shown through his experiences. One of the themes that was very consistent throughout the story was how the Indians were treated during this time. On many occasions, Little Tree is used to represent the Indian people. Through him, the reader sees and learns to understand the treatment of Indians during that time, as I explained in my previous letter.

I found this book comical, interesting, informative, and most importantly, true. By "true," I mean that I agreed with all the themes that were presented in this book. All in all, I really enjoyed this book.

Student letter 6

The Road to Chlifa (Michele Marineau)

It is true... Canada is a country full of opportunities. It is the "perfect" balance of individuality and teamwork. Being a mixed economy, it has freedom, rights, and some restrictions. Ideally, it is the perfect place to live. However, although we may not realize it, Canada and its citizens possess flaws and imperfections just as all nationalities do. Of course, we all know and understand that nothing is perfect. But, do we really believe this? Only an outsider can see the true flaws of our community, our country. Perhaps it is because they believe their own country is best and, therefore, look for flaws in our country to strengthen their belief. This novel provided an *opportunity to see Canada through the eyes of an immigrant and through the eyes of a Canadian citizen with the two points of view which alternate throughout this novel. This book allowed me to see how an "outsider" sees our customs, and what struck them the most about our country and its people when they first arrived in Canada.*

So that I do not lose you when I begin to analyze this novel, I will give you a brief summary of the events in this novel. The novel starts in February 1990 in Montreal. Karim has built a wall around him which none of his classmates from the high school which he attended could penetrate. He was miserable and suffered from guilt and memories of his journey. He despised everything about Montreal and its citizens. Karim's French teacher took his class on a trip up North. At night, one of the female students, My-Lan walked out other room to get a glass of water. Some of her classmates, Dave and his gang, intercepted her in the hallway and dragged her to the boys' bathroom and forced a glass of vodka down her throat. They then began to loosen her up a little. They said later that they wouldn't have raped her but I'm not too sure if that's true. Karim heard them and went to the bathroom. He instructed them to let her go but they refused. Karim went for Dave and started punching him. Dave's best friend slipped him a switch blade and after multiple stabs, Karim became unconscious. A while later, Karim woke in the hospital. He suffered from three cracked ribs, a split eyebrow, a broken tooth, and a great gash which could have killed him if it had gone three-quarters of an inch farther.

From here the story flashes back to what happened in Lebanon to make Karim so uncaring. His family had just left for Montreal to visit Karim's grandmother when the situation in Lebanon became much worse. Karim could not join them as he had exams. He was staying with Bechir his best friend. Karim had fallen in love with Nada, whom he had known for life. The situation in Lebanon deteriorated so much that Bechir and his family left for France. They offered to take Karim as well but he believed it was cowardly to leave. The day after his best friend left, Karim was walking to Nada's house, excited as he could spend the day alone with her and perhaps get a *second kiss. Where Nada's house had once stood, lay pieces of rubble from the smashed house. Karim was devastated and frantically looked for survivors. He only found Nada's younger sister, twelve year old Maha, and her baby brother, Jad. When the bomb fell two days ago, Aunt Leila, Nada, and her parents died. Maha and Jad were going to be sent to an orphanage in France but there was a chance that they might be separated. Thus, in the middle of the night Maha took Jad and some supplies and was about to set out for Chlifa when Karim awoke. He tried to convince her that the journey was too difficult, but she was stubborn and would do anything to keep her brother with her. She was going to travel to Chlifa where she and her brother could stay with a family friend. Karim decided to go with them. Perhaps because she was Nada's sister or maybe because there was nothing left for him in Lebanon.*

Their journey was long, difficult, and tiring. When they had almost reached Chlifa, they got into a very large argument. Karim said that he was just taking a walk to get away for awhile and left Maha alone with Jad. When he finally returned, he found Jad playing on the ground and Maha behind a rock with her slit throat. She was dead. Karim blamed himself. He knew Maha did not die from the knife that slit her throat. She died from abandonment. Karim killed Maha. Karim continued on to Chlifa with Jad where he buried Maha. He then caught a flight to Quebec where he met his parents.

The flashback ends and we return to the hospital room. Karim recovered and began to forgive himself and become happier with his life in Quebec. He became good friends with My-Lan and Simon. He learned many things during his flashback to his journey and his time in the hospital. First of all, he doesn't have a monopoly on unhappiness. That is, he was convinced that he was the only one who saw suffering and death. Secondly, he began to ask, "What's the point of wallowing in unhappiness. He had "draped himself in bits of unhappiness as if it was a virtue that gave him the right to hold everyone else in contempt." Third, whether you live or die, it's your choice.

As I mentioned earlier, two points of view are present in The Road to Chlifa. There is the point of view of Karim, a Lebanese Muslim, and the point of view of a female classmate in Canada. The majority of the novel was written from the point of view of Karim. Reading from the two points of view was effective in understanding how Karim felt towards his classmates and how his classmates felt towards him. The female classmate who tried to understand Karim and figure him out was very insightful. She was the only one who realized that Karim acted the way he did because he was in despair. In fact, the truth was that Karim ignored everyone and tried to make himself miserable because of his immense guilt over Maha. He built a wall around himself in Canada which no one, not even his parents, could penetrate. In the beginning, he fed on his despair and did not care whether he lived or died. For instance, when he first woke up in the hospital, he was somewhat disappointed that he was still alive.

This novel really shows how students react to people of different nationalities. Some students at the Canadian high school which Karim attended kept bothering him because they enjoyed the mystery. He truly intrigued them and his resistance was a challenge. In order to satisfy their curiosity, they constructed stories and rumors to explain what they did not know about him. Often, in reality, people are attracted to others because they want to help them and figure them out. They enjoy the challenge and the mystery. Other students at the high school did not accept him as he was different. He was another guinea pig for them to tease and bother. This group of boys, Dave's gang, put others down to make themselves look better. They were jealous because of all the attention Karim received. They attacked anyone they did not like the look of. A lot of racism, sexism, and womanizing was evident in this school. This novel also expressed the idea of how cruel kids can be to each other. The Road to Chlifa also shows how deeply tragedies can affect people.

Karim was born in Beirut, Lebanon. When he was three years old, the war between the Christians and the Muslims began. Since then, he lived a rat's life, hiding in the cellar every time the bombing started again. He seems *like the perfect young man but has flaws like all us. He is selfish, proud, and touchy. When he arrived in Montreal, Canada, he was not in a healthy state of mind. He suffered from extreme guilt and was troubled by memories of Lebanon and the journey to Chlifa. He had endured so much tragedy. He used to be the perfect young man and had very strong morals. In fact, I was surprised to find anyone, even a character, who had as strong morals as me. He would not swear, drink, smoke, or lie. However, when he came to Canada, he lost his morals. He did not care anymore and just wished to live in misery. In Canada, it angered and disturbed Karim that life was so peaceful in spite of the war going on in Lebanon. He believed that the troubles of his classmates were so trivial in comparison to his. He thought that no one understood what he felt and what he had seen. However, he realized that My-Lan had seen the same things as he had. When he came to Canada, he lived in a bubble, isolated from the entire world. My-Lan became his only connection to the outside world. I believe Karim helped My-Lan for Maha and himself. He was overcome by guilt when Maha died and perhaps thought he could relieve some of the guilt by helping someone else to make up for what he did not do for Maha. When Karim lived in Lebanon, he despised all of the people who left for "safer" countries. He believed it was cowardly and that you must stick with your country and stand up for it. However, he realized at the end that the people were needed to rebuild Lebanon after the war and that if you stayed, it would only result in more losses, in more death.*

Some parts of the novel seemed somewhat unrealistic. First of all, the French teacher who took his class on the trip up north did not seem strict enough. In the bus, some boys were drinking alcohol and yet he did nothing. Also, there was much more racism, sexism, and womanizing in the school than I had thought there would be. This is probably because our school is so much more sheltered and the school in the book was a high school.

I believe this novel was easier for me to understand as it included many terms which I use in prayer and because Karim was Muslim. Some terms *which I found in this novel were Allah (God), Kuran (our book), Incha Allah (if god wishes), Karim (a common Muslim name), etc. Also, I have experienced some of the same things that Karim did in the novel.*

As I mentioned earlier, this novel opened my eyes to some of Canada's flaws and how immigrants view our country. All of the immigrants who were in Karim's school were struck by the ethnic diversity in our country. They had never seen so many races in one place together. They also noticed how discipline and respect held less importance in Canada. I believe this and racism are some of our largest problems in Canada. One immigrant, Tung, was shocked by rudeness, cheekiness, and indecency. Tung also found some of the attitudes too aggressive. One of the immigrants brought up a very credible point. Everyone talks about immigrants as a block. "They" are like this and "they" do that. However, they are not all alike. They are lumped together by country, nationality, and religion instead of by interests. I believe everyone is a little racist although they do not try to be. When you see an African man, do you see a man? NO! You see a Black Man. You are not prejudiced against him but just by acknowledging his color in such a manner, you see him as being different. I believe the first step in overcoming racism is overcoming this concept. There are stereotypes against certain nationalities which are seen as universal truths. Personally, I am tired of the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists. This is an extreme generalization. For instance, in England, only a certain number of Muslims can reside there because of this stereotype. People think Muslims treat women very poorly. This is true in places like Pakistan, but it is not a religious custom. It is a national custom of the country. Though some interpret the words of the Quran (a.k.a. Koran or Kuran) in such a way so that justifies their actions, in Islam, honor killing, terrorism, and poor treatment of women are not customs and are not excusable or permitted.

Appendix 5

Why I Use a Program Like Reading Room?

- Students grow to love reading.
- Students read more.
- Students improve reading comprehension.
- Students become better thinkers.
- Students become better writers.
- Students apply knowledge and concepts gained from formalized instruction.
- Students use strategies to help them improve their reading.
- Students develop reading flexibility.
- Students develop an appreciation of language.
- Students acquire a new understanding of themselves and others.
- Teachers get to know their students really well.
- Individualization of instruction becomes a reality.

Appendix 6

Student Exemplar Letter

Page 1

February 22, 1994

Watching the Roses

Adele Geras

Dear Mrs. van Manen,

I have just finished reading a most extraordinary book. Watching the Roses is a novel that is inspired by the classic fairy tale Sleeping Beauty. Unlike the fairy tale, this story has not been written to enchant young minds, nor to enforce the idea that all of life's events will come to a happy ending. Rather, Watching the Roses deals with subject matter that is horrifying, dark, depressing, and so real in the time present today.

Alice is the heroine in this modern-day tale. She is the Sleeping Beauty, the princess, the loved and cherished, and like the fairy tale, she is the one doomed to die on her eighteenth birthday. Alice was cursed with an ill-wish on her christening almost eighteen years ago by her wicked aunt, yet that curse had been weakened so she may escape death and instead fall into a deep sleep. The day of her birthday arrives, and true enough, tragedy befalls Alice. Alice is not pricked by the spindle as in the fairy tale, yet instead, Adele Geras has made it so Alice experiences something much worse than a spindle prick. Alice experiences something much worse.

Geras has wonderfully crafted this event to fit so perfectly in life today, for this tragedy is so frightfully horrifying that it may even be considered worse than death. Alice is raped. And so now, the princess falls into the deep sleep. And it isn't really a deep sleep, yet rather a coma-like state of depression. Alice has isolated herself from the rest of the world, confining herself to writing in a diary, and in this manner, she reveals her feelings to the reader and retells the events leading up to her rape.

Watching the Roses follows the very basic storyline of Sleeping Beauty, yet the original fairy tale has been stripped of the perfect ending, the fake happiness, and the feeling that everything will turn out splendidly, to make a story that is believable and darkly real. For Alice, who lies in a deep sleep of depression, she must find the strength to "wake up." Unlike the fairy tale where Sleeping Beauty is woken with the magical kiss by the prince, it is the heroine in Watching the Roses who must ultimately save herself.

I felt that by incorporating the rape into the story, the author is saying that yes, rape is a devastating thing, that could stop one's life. Yet she is also saying that it is possible for one to find the strength to go on with life, and it is possible for one to wake up after something like this has happened. By using the story Sleeping Beauty, Adele Geras has explained this idea so fully that the reader understands completely. Through Alice, the reader feels the numbness, the pain, the desperation, and finally the steps towards healing after such a tragedy like rape.

Your student,
Irene

Appendix 7

Reading Room Evaluation

Name: ______________________________

A. Reading Room Rules (35%)

1. Following rules - includes bringing book to class, reading at home to make up for missed classes, sustaining reading or letter writing, not disturbing others, not abusing washroom privileges

2. Number of books read

Total

B. Reading Room Letters (50%)

1. Organization and neatness - includes numbering pages, dating letters, including headings, keeping Penbook log updated, writing in pen

2. Number of letters

3. Letters to teacher

4. Quality of letters

Reflective, exploratory, development of ideas related to literature or the reading process is substantial

Very good description of story events, discussion of character development, likes and dislikes, thoughtful questions

Fair to good description of story events and characters; likes and dislikes are stated but are not developed adequately

Letters show little or no reflective ability; reference to story events or reading process is lacking

Letters do not relate to literature or the reading process most of the time

5. One extra letter above minimum

C. Reading Room Goals (15%)

Accomplishment of goals